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A very naked people



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A VERY NAKED PEOPLE





THE "CHARIOT" OF THE KING OF THE NIGHT IN
DAHOMEY

A VERY NAKED PEOPLE

by
Albert Londres

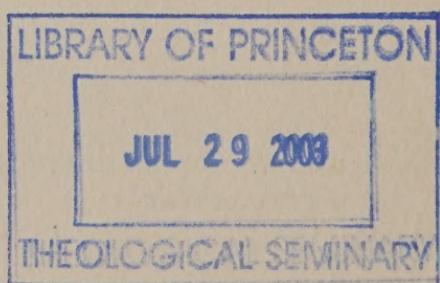
TRANSLATED BY

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ILLUSTRATED

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A VERY NAKED PEOPLE

I

THIS WAS DAKAR

THIS was Dakar!

A block of white stones: the governor-general's palace.

On our right: Gorée, the island whence the last slavers shipped the last slaves on a vessel called the *Return*.

The *Return* — which never returned anything!

Already the passengers on our liner were helmeted and dressed in whites. Since morning every one had been taking quinine. We had bidden



good-by to the pleasure of drinking well, eating well, breathing freely, and, above all, of having dry pores. As for me, I was wondering how to substitute a bath towel for my handkerchief. You would have thought sky and sea had been covered with isinglass. Nature was congested. This was Africa, the true, the accursed, Africa ; black Africa.

The Chargeurs-Reunis wharf lay before us ; the *Belle-Ile* came alongside.

“Better stay aboard with us,” said the captain.
“That’s the devil’s own country.”

I had landed at Dakar before. I remembered. It was in the abominable month of September. Heat rose from the ground, crept from between the walls, fell from the skies. Travelers experienced all the sensations of bread in the baking. The town was saturated with an oppressive sadness. I wandered about at random, with no hope of losing my way, knowing very well that Dakar, the seaport of our black empire, was not a large town. But what lay behind it?

I retained two recollections of that first visit. Phonographs echoing in the streets of the administrative quarter ; European tunes dragging them-

selves about like exiles in a land in which they knew themselves lost. Then, nearer the water, in the dining room of a hotel that called itself the Metropole, a hundred or so whites, young rather than old, without waistcoats, without neckties, shirts open over naked chests, lifting, with heavy forks, bits of "bid-oche" which hardly tempted them. The Colonials!

On two other occasions I had not been able to land at Dakar on account of the quarantine. Dakar had been plague ridden. Ships had fled at full steam, passing from Madeira or the Canaries directly to Pernambuco or Rio de Janeiro. That was in the time of the yellow fever.

A gay time! A jolly fever!

But that didn't keep France awake, be sure. Who knew anything about it? Nevertheless . . .

"Come along," a letter I found, on my return from a voyage, urged me. "Come and see something of what goes on in Dakar. We've just had our hundred and twenty-eighth death. (Among the whites, of course.) So long as one is quiet about it, one may die. We'll keep a cage for you in our house. Come on!"



The nightmare lasted for five months. A death and a half a day. The women and children had all escaped. Only the men stayed, which was as it should be. The priest who buried you in the morning would be buried himself the next day — politely! Upon the hundred and fiftieth death eminent doctors set out from Paris, armed with apparatus for the extermination of mosquitoes. You know that yellow fever is spread by a mosquito called the stegomia? But you can't ask the mosquito who bites you if it's a stegomia; they won't talk to you, those animals! Look at the head of a Colonial whenever he scratches himself — which is all day and all night.

Orders were issued; steps were taken. Doors and windows were to be screened. No one ate or slept, any longer, except in a cage. After six o'clock every one must stay at home, or, if they did go out, must do so booted, fingers in gloves, cowled in netting.

They lived through that.

Dakar was the promenade of ghosts, gloved, cowled ghosts. Don't forget that, as soon as night came, it was a little hotter than it had been by day.

So you can have some idea of how much pleasure strollers, so clad, could derive from the freshness of the evening.

A hundred and ninety-seven deaths, announced the government.

More than three hundred, insisted the Colonials.
The truth is underground.

Six o'clock. The gangplanks were run up the ship. Now the colonial officials were beside themselves with anxiety. The truth was that they didn't know where they were going, poor devils! They might be headed for Dahomey, Guinea, the Soudan, Togoland, the Ivory Coast, the Haute-Volta, Nigeria. Their voyage might be at an end; they might still have ten, twenty, thirty days of travel before them, in a motor, in a barge, in a cart. They were about to learn their fate from a bulletin to be posted in the corridor.

The notice was put up at last. They gathered around it, a sheet of paper signed: 'Carde, Governor-General.' Exclamations; protests; grimaces! One heard impolite language. A woman swore she would not go to Zinder with her husband. A lieutenant,



who had applied for Timbuctoo, and had shown us his uniform as a camel-corps officer, was sent to the Ivory Coast. One who had counted on staying on the Coast was ordered to the Sahara. A couple that had spent ten years in the low, moist country, among the lagoons of Abidjan, was to be sent to a dry land, to Ouagadougou!

“But I’ll die there — and my wife, too!” said the husband. “If Carde wants our hides, I wish he’d skin us at once and be done with it! Here —” He turned to the proconsul’s representative. “Take them to him this evening — he can use them to make shoes for his wife!”

But his wife wasn’t prepared to sacrifice her skin to make shoes for Madame Carde.

“Take our skin — take it, then!” the man who didn’t like the dry country kept on shouting. “Afterwards there’ll be our back bones — they’ll do for a walking stick!”

All this was the result of the turn table. That was an invention of M. Carde’s.

Before his time colonial officials served out their terms in a single colony, but now the master makes

them waltz. They don't like his dance. You see, when you talk about a colonial official now you no longer refer to a man with the spirit of an adventurer. It is a career that has become dangerously commonplace. The old enthusiasm is gone, the idea of colonization as a romantic business, eagerly-sought perils, a cabin in the jungle, the conquest of the negro soul, the little black wench. Your colonial administrator sets out now with his wife, his children, and his mother-in-law. It's roughing it with a pair of curling irons!

So we went ashore.

“Hey! Hey! Porter!”

“A porter?” a friend exclaimed to me. “What sort of aristocratic ideas have you brought with you? The negroes aren't porters in Senegal, my dear fellow — they're voters!” Going down the gangplank he muttered: “They vote — they vote! Pretty soon they'll be dancing gavottes!”

So I said good-by to the *Belle-Ile*, bidding her Godspeed on her way to Buenos Aires to load her cargo of frozen meats. I bade farewell to Captain Rousselet, that dear old rascal — if this was the



devil's country I'd find it out! I was by the bridge; I couldn't cross it. A white and a black were amusing themselves with a bout of *savate*.

"You'll hit me?" said the negro. "Ah — you'll hit me? This isn't France, this is Senegal, do you understand that? Senegal, my country. I'm at home here — do you get that?"

They had caught the negro examining the interior of a cabin too intimately. A steward had led him ashore, with his feet rather than with his hands.

"This is France," said the steward, "and if you come aboard again —" Well, he told him, explicitly, what would happen.

"Yes? Well, you come ashore and I'll take you before the Commissioner — do you see?" The negro was undaunted. "This is Senegal, not France."

And he spat, as if to drown all together the steward, the ship, the whole white race and its possessions, in one vast gesture of contempt.

Everything was black when I landed in this negro country. Night had already fallen. Leaning against the fence an old Ouolof smoked her pipe.

"Good evening!" I said to her.



“Him! Him!” she answered.

That was the only greeting that melancholy country had for me. So I went on in to the town.

Ah! The new post office was finished. And a good thing, too. The old one was so disgusting that one dared not lick the stamps one bought there. But how dismal everything was! What? No more terraces before the cafés, those dear, familiar terraces, like those at home, which France exports so delightfully to all her colonies? What had happened? The regulations against yellow fever were still in force; that was what was the matter. I wondered if the stegomia was still flourishing. Where was my machine to destroy mosquitoes? I should be puffing out a protective cloud before me as I went. It was still in the shop. If my mother knew that! And, damn it, it was true that those beasts were especially fond of fresh, pure blood. Well. . . .

Dakar, I saw, was no longer anything but a huge cage. The restaurants were behind veils of metal. So were the people in the windows, who fancied they were getting a breath of air. Two Colonials, drinking their *apéritifs*, were surrounded by



a huge screen set up in a garden. A foresighted housewife must have put them away so, safe from cats and flies, against cooking them in the morning. Amazed, I stared at them.

“Hello!” they said. “Have you just landed?”

I went on my way. I heard my feet striking the gate of Africa.

I TAKE TO THE ROAD

THE train for the Soudan leaves Dakar every Tuesday. So it is arranged that the boat arrives on Wednesday! That's all right. You are in step immediately. As a matter of fact, it is not advisable to arrive in Africa breathing fire, the devil in your body, and ants in your legs. That country does not care to have you try to hurry it. If you do it sends its policeman after you. Namely, the sun.

The sun appears. He strikes the back of your neck and says: "Will you go home — and walk more slowly?"



You may disobey him the first time; perhaps he will say nothing about it, being, after all, a good long way up above. But if you are insensible to correction, if you disregard him too often, he will come with his stick, that policeman, a big bamboo pole, and strike you violently over the head. You will know all about it after that!

Six days had passed. The black trip was beginning. I was about "to take my foot off the road," as the negroes say, meaning I was ready to leave Dakar. It was to be Senegal, Guinea, the Soudan, the Haute-Volta, the Ivory Coast, Togoland, Dahomey, the Gabon and the Congo. After Dakar, Timbuctoo! I am giving you noble names, you see — here's Ouagadougou! Before me were the jungle, the forest, the wood cutters, the gold miners, the rail layers. Ah, the rail layers!

Great rivers, that one mounts endlessly, mud houses, the greatest generators of heat yet invented; I was to know all about them. The railway lay before me — and motors, barges, canoes, bullock carts. In a word — the black empire of the Republic. An



unknown land inhabited by people dressed all in white or dressed in nothing. I had visions. . . .

Suddenly some one was asking me a question.

“Have you china and silver? Furniture? How many pieces?”

I was on the platform of the station at Dakar.

“How many trunks? Ten? Twenty? Thirty? Forty? I have to know, on account of the vans.”

I said I had one valise.

“One valise? Where are you going?”

“Everywhere!”

The white railway employee turned his back and shrugged his shoulders; he had no words. Are there really people who travel with forty trunks? If there are, and they have not been decorated with the Order of the Railway, the Minister of Public Travel is decidedly remiss.

But the man was right. Travelers came with so many boxes that they looked like wholesale grocers on the move. Meats, vegetables, fish, fruits, all the edibles modern industry has been able to put up in tins or boxes. Lingerie, bedding, bedsteads, had followed from France to be eaten in a jungle



station, the victuals by the bushmen, the furniture by the ants.

A handsome negro was ahead of me at the ticket window. He was an elector of Blaise, so his brothers called him M. Diagne. He wore a hat they call a gourd, which must have been of good service for a dozen years to those tramps who follow the railways.

“Give me a ticket!” he ordered.

“Where to?”

“How do I know? Give me one for fifty francs!”

Once the earth nut season is at an end the Senegalese have a little money; then they like to go traveling. But they don’t go to Thies, or Saint-Louis, or Kayes. They go as far as fifty, or eighty, or a hundred, francs will take them, according to the luck they have had. At the stops you see them at the gates, shouting: “Hello, Mamadou! Hello, there, Galandou — hey, Bakari! How do you do, Gamba!” They show themselves very much aware of how fine a thing it is to be a traveler. They are proud. Afterward, they go home — on foot!

The train began to move. It was about to



travel over twelve hundred kilometers of the line. It united the Atlantic to the Niger. Then the railway was at an end. One makes the rest of the journey by road or river. Twelve hundred kilometers! That is the greatest task we have accomplished in black Africa. For any one who does not care to be thought ungrateful merely to salute that railway would not be a sufficient gesture; one should take along a box of immortelles (if one has forty trunks!) and spread those dried blossoms along the track. So one could be sure of honoring, at each cross tie, the memory of a negro fallen for civilization.

It would not be right to say that Senegambia resembles a botanical garden: there is only one tree. That is the baobab. The baobab is a giant in despair, one-armed and deformed. It extends its mutilated branches toward heaven, as if to cry out to God the wickedness of the hangmen who have crucified it. One can believe that it would utter terrible cries if it could speak and make signs of agony if nature had given it the power to move. It would deplore its awkwardness, and its arms which are like the



stumps of a man whose legs have been amputated at the thighs!

“Have a good look at it. It gives us all the shade we have. You stare, open mouthed. Well, you can close your mouth, for this scenery will not change for six hundred kilometers. Your mouth will grow tired during that journey! In a land where we need shade, that’s what we get! But, let me introduce myself! Jean Miette, superintendent of public works, sixteen years in the colony, not a hair left on my head, not a season at Vichy. I had the finest liver on the Ivory Coast. That couldn’t go on. Carde wants my liver — he sends me to the Soudan, where one never perspires. He decided the matter one morning, in his pastry palace. He said: ‘Miette will perspire no more!’ I am disciplined. I will perspire no more — that’s all there is to that!”

He never stopped wiping his forehead.

“And my liver will be like a stone, which will make two stones, with the one I have under my helmet. Aren’t you thirsty?”

We had passed Rufisque, Thies, Bambey, Diourbel. At the stations the natives screeched at

the doors of their roomy carriages. They knew every one, they called every one by name.

“Hello, Molobali! Good morning, Suliman! Hey, Koukouli! Yo-ho, Poincaré!”

There were many Poincarés. To say nothing of Herriots, Kofaks, Citroëns, Painlevés, Urodonals — all the names one sees printed in big type in the French newspapers.

“Good day, Samaritan!”

Dioulas — hawkers — sold them kola nuts. The blacks eat kola nuts as we eat bread. They live on them. They affect their hearts, and they die because of eating them.

Here, at a station, were a score who were ready to participate in the splendid and mysterious business of travel by steam; they were about to board the train. They rushed to take a carriage by storm. It was an irresistible charge. Those who already had places received them, making a rampart of themselves, and flung them back on the platform on all fours. Enraged, the defeated ones flung curses at the compartments. The bored travelers wouldn't give way. The others swore by all their medicine



men. A dark fighter emerged. A white man appeared and undertook to break up the fight. Everything was all right so long as he didn't hit a voter. When that happened there was at once a fine outcry.

“You hit me? You insulted me?”

“Oh, to hell with you!”

“I'm as good as you! I'm as much a Frenchman as you!”

Then the voter sought witnesses.

“You'll have to pay twenty-five francs!” he shouted, to the white man. “Twenty-five francs!”

“Come on with you — I'll have fifty francs' worth!” retorted the white man.

A white man who strikes a black is liable to a fine of twenty-five francs, but there must be witnesses.

The train began to move again. The negro clung to the running board.

“I'll come back! You'll be condemned! Au revoir — yah — yah — au revoir!”

On board the train was a young man just beginning his colonial career. He didn't feel very much



at his ease in Africa. He would have been better off in his native town. He lacked the vocation. He showed his wife's photograph to every one.

“Look at what they’re sending out to us now!” said M. Miette. “Either they bring their whole family along or they cry over a photograph! Put back your pasteboard, young fellow! You’re making a poor start. You have to be weaned to follow this business! You can’t go home on the Metro for your dinner or buy the third edition of the *Intransigeant*, to be sure, but that’s a saving, after all!”

Then there was an old man Levreau, a veteran. He had been in the Soudan for twenty-one years, and was on his way back from his second trip to France in all that time. He cares for no place other than Kayes.

“You see,” he explained, “Kayes is one of the hottest three towns in the world. Podor, Djibouti and Kayes, as every one knows — you need seek no farther. Wherever else I go I waste away.”

The next day at noon — the train would reach the hottest town in the world at noon! — old Levreau got off at Kayes. His six wives were wait-



ing for him on the platform, six black wives, including two Moors with great camel's eyes.

“Good morning, my dears — good morning!” he said.

They flung themselves in his arms.

“Good morning, Papa!” they answered. “Ah, Papa — good morning!”

Behind them servants, men and women, clapped their hands. He was brisk, lively, debonair. Inside the station the thermometer stood at forty-six degrees, centigrade!

III

STARK NAKED

TWENTY million blacks, subjects of France. Two empires. French West Africa: A. O. F. French Equatorial Africa: A. E. F. The Aof and the Aef. Thirteen million subjects in Aof; four million in Aef. Togoland and Cameroon make up the rest.

Germany lost those two colonies in the war. By chance, rather than through modesty, the English didn't gobble them up. So they were restored to us.

Eight colonies in Aof: Mauretania, Senegambia, Guinea, the Ivory Coast, Dahomey, Haute-



Volta, the Soudan, Nigeria. Four in Aef: Gabon, the Middle Congo, Ouabangui-Chari, Tchad.

French West Africa extends from Lake Tchad to the Atlantic, from the Sahara to the Gulf of Guinea. It is a territory of five million square kilometers. French Equatorial Africa begins at the Equator, and ends at the black devil, eating into the heart of Africa. There's plenty of room to take a walk!

Historians say the country is in the form of a trough, but the word cauldron would fit it better. One simmers there; one is on the fire just as is a piece of corned beef in its pot. The devil could very well come and taste you on the end of his fork — you are never done! You are being cooked day and night. After being there, if they put you in a duck press, the blood they squeezed from you would do an anæmic patient no good!

But why complain? Africa forces no one to visit her. No sirens call to you from her coasts. There are no natural harbors, and everywhere the bar repulses you. That's a fine song the crews of the surf boats sing:



A QUEEN OF THE IVORY COAST

*Oh, we're the husky lads,
The masters of the bar!
Give way — give way!*

The boat is flung back.

*A long pull, a strong pull —
Oh, we'll make it — we will —
With our fetiches to help!*

Much the bar cares! It drives back those who want to land. If they are persistent, it spills them overboard. That is how Africa welcomes her visitors!

We left Senegambia behind — a colony of ballot boxes, the kingdom of Blaise, the ten million enfranchised citizens of the four districts, practiced in magic, in boxing, in *savate*. We had come to the blacks, the pure, true blacks, not the children of universal suffrage, but the sons of the old Cham. They run from the brush to greet you with a “Good morning!” They wave their arms with such good will and sincerity, they smile so good naturedly, that you can’t help believing they are actually glad to see you. They look at you as if in some other incarna-



tion they had been dogs to whom you had given sugar. Among them you feel like a beneficent and condescending Deity.

Their villages were not to be found clustered together. They seemed to be spread broadcast over the whole great continent. Little clusters of huts here and there, with hundreds of kilometers between. After all, the blacks are no longer a growing race. Men and women went naked without shame. Women, sometimes, crossed their arms over their breasts when you met them — but they were the old ones!

They were always on the go. Where were they going, on those endless journeys of theirs? Far. Very far. A week's journey was the merest commonplace for them. They walked as we breathe.

Men, women and children, they walked, pluckily, single hearted. All Africa seemed to be on the road at the first sign of dawn. There were peddlers, carrying salt from Timbuctoo down to the coast, and going back from the Gold Coast with kola nuts. There were blacks, incredibly innocent, who went from one end of the Soudan to the other about a legacy, a dispute concerning a woman —



above all, concerning an affair about nothing at all. Whole villages took the road, men, women and children again, carrying cotton to the local commandant. After being in motion for two days the village would halt the following morning. Those whose cotton was not well picked would go to jail. All walked, a bag weighing thirty kilos on their heads, never complaining, never looking for harm.

I saw seven prisoners, in Indian file, roped together by their necks. The seven heads looked like seven great knots in the rope. I learned later that a rifleman accompanied them. It was much later that I found that out — the guard was five kilometers ahead. And they followed him, meekly!

Farther on a militiaman, his wife, his child. He strode ahead, carrying nothing but his gun. The child wore a European vest, which took care not to hang low enough to hide anything worth seeing. The wife wound up the procession, wearing, for a loin cloth, a bunch of leaves. She was the moving van of the trip. A regular scaffold was balanced on her head: three gourds, smoked fish, their tails hanging out, an empty bottle, two beds, six rations of tapioca,



the whole surmounted by the marital girdle. On her back, held up by an old piece of calico, in the place where, as a rule, black babies are carried, was a very small cat, which wailed continually, turning its head back toward the home the family was leaving behind.

Then there was the postman, naked and very sober. He held a piece of wood in his hand, and in a cleft, at the end of this stick, was his letter. He couldn't have carried the Blessed Sacrament with more care. Was he going far? A hundred kilometers. He held out his little stick to every European he met. They looked at the address and shook their heads. Oh, he would find the addressee! Then? Then he would go home again.

We were following the great trail that leads to Nigeria. It was well traveled. Why all those long trips? For everything and for nothing. One saw a great fellow whose cow had been stolen; he was going to tell his troubles to the commandant. That meant three days on the road. The commandant would give him a stamped paper, and he would go back to his village. Then the man who had been robbed would set out again with the thief, both walk-



ing on, one behind the other, without bitterness, toward the justice of the whites.

Then there were emigrants. Their soil was exhausted; they were making for new country. Once arrived, they would offer a sacrifice to the soil, begging it to receive them kindly. If the chicken they slaughtered fell with its feet upward, that would mean that the ground had answered: No! Then they would go farther.

Penniless, their dunnage on their backs, an empty gourd on their heads, gay — for when the negro is sad he dies — they traverse Africa as we cross from one sidewalk to another. At night they plant themselves in a village. No one knows them; what of it? They enter a hut and salute the occupants.

“How are you? Me, I’m fine!”

And some one always feeds them, as one might a visiting relative who was passing that way.

There are no poor among the blacks. They practice the true communism. The man who refused to feed one who was hungry would be dishonored. You never hear of a man falling from hunger. When



they do die of hunger it is *en masse*, all at once, and because there is famine.

For them money has no value. The word economy is unknown in their dialects. Our phrase, to make a fortune, has no meaning in Africa. Does one surpass another — do some succeed more than the rest? Formerly they worked only to live. Now they work, in addition, to pay taxes. Sometimes they even pay twice instead of once. Tiny scandals in a vast land!

I WAS not to reach Bamako that night; Kita was to be the end of the stage. A great center; five whites, ten thousand blacks! It is the town of the chanters¹ — those who sing the praises of their contemporaries. A chanter was holding forth under the magic tree. He spoke in a high voice, addressing a great devil of a man who stood five paces from him. All around two hundred people made a ring.

“What’s he saying?” I asked the interpreter.

¹ This is the nearest in English, I believe, for the word *riot*.



“He is recounting the fame of that negro over there.”

“Why — what has he done?”

“He’s given the chanter money, so the chanter proclaims his merits here in the public square.”

The hero stood, straight and proud.

“What is he telling them about him?” I asked.

The interpreter listened; then he translated for me.

“His client must have been a soldier,” he told me. “He boasts of the chevrons of a corporal. He says to him: ‘You — you have conquered, you have crossed seas and mountains. When you waved your weapon the great cannons of the whites, that go boom-boom, took to flight. You have crossed France, with flowers about your gun. The great chief of the French has shaken your hand. You are young, strong and handsome. Your betrothed is as pure as a young cow. Your father is the mightiest hunter of the race of the Bambara. Your mother was a virgin when she married your father. Your house is fine and beautiful. Your children will learn to speak



and to walk sooner than those of any other man. Your wives will surround you and be faithful to you. Your belly will always be full of food. You are great, Mamadou, as great as the village tree.' ”

“How much does all that cost him?” I asked.

“He’ll tell us,” said the interpreter. And he stepped over to him. “How much did you pay the chanter?”

“I gave him forty francs.”

“And now, then, you haven’t a penny left?”

He answered:

“I have no more money, but lots of honor!”

“Your father is well?”

“Yes, he’s well.”

“Your mother is well?”

“Yes, she’s well.”

“Your child is well?”

“Yes, he’s well.”

“Your chicken is all right?”

“Yes, it’s fine.”

“Your dog is well?”

“Yes, he’s all right.”

“Your wife is well?”



That exchange of greetings lasted for a minute. The negro, meeting another negro, asked about all his possessions, about his fields, his horse, his boat. Last of all, about his wife.

IV
AT BAMAKO

I WAS at Bamako, capital of the Soudan, seated among natives, in the market, to the great scandal of the Europeans. The whites who passed looked at me as if I had been a train! They let me see very clearly that I should lose face by mingling my superior self thus with the Soudanese. The natives would enjoy themselves laughing at me.

Behind their sewing machines the men made *boubous* — ample cloth garments resembling shirts when they were not more like smocks. The women

sat before little stools filled with what they had to sell: three pieces of sugar, four bananas, six kola nuts, a gourd full of milk, five or six thousand flies . . . little black balls like goat dung . . . other balls, white, these, and giving out a smell which is the smell of all Africa. It was the smell of karite butter. No cesspool, no opening, be it of a sewer or a drain, can give you an idea of that odor! No matter how hardy you may be, you would fall in a faint at the faintest whiff of karite butter. It's a smell like a fang, for it sinks itself in you and tears at your vitals!

This vegetable butter is used in every sauce. It serves for cooking and for the toilet. It greases pans and oils skins. The more the skin shines in the sun, the more seductive the lady. Unfortunately you can smell her as far off as you can see her. I have often thought of having a man with a pail of water follow me, and an energetic rubber. Then as soon as I saw a belle, I would lasso her, dip her in the water and have her thoroughly scrubbed.

Yes, but dear ladies of fashion in Europe and America, you use karite butter yourselves every day!



It is, oh, you fastidious ones, the base of all your beauty creams.

AH, what delightful commercial relations the whites have established with the blacks! We send them the most incredible rubbish, that even the frequenters of the ten-cent stores as they used to be would have laughed at. And those wares, officially, are called trade goods!

You must understand that when our old hats, our shoes that can't be half soled again, our mildewed coats, have endured the rains and the dusts of the squares about the Temple for five years or so they make their way to the Soudan. You may see them in the market at Bamako. Carefully set out on trays, they make up a laughable stock. Look — fourteen hats, hard or soft. Five have lost their brims. A negro begins bargaining for one of these. Twelve francs. He tries it on. It's a discarded jockey cap. He creases the felt down the center, looks at himself, finds it becoming — and buys it.

There is a pair of shoes made up of one that

used to be black and another that began by being tan. Even so, as I looked at them, they didn't seem to be the same size. They weren't; one was a nine, the other an eleven. How much? Thirty francs!

Not so long ago the English governor of the Gold Coast forbade the importation of old dinner jackets into his colony. My lords and gentlemen, that is what becomes of your evening clothes! One must be full of spleen, indeed, not to laugh as one takes a walk in Akra. But there are those in England who don't see the joke. I have heard that a famous London tailor, one with the Royal Warrant, wanted to end it all when he heard that a coat bearing his label was being worn by a black!

As for us, we haven't put the ban on anything, yet. Isn't that my grandfather's riquimpette? Certainly. I recognize it. He wore it the day of my mother's First Communion! Now it ends in a hole to make you whistle! Thirty-two francs. I bought it for my boy — and he kissed my hands in his gratitude. But I had made a mistake. I hadn't noticed that he had no trousers; it wasn't noticeable, you see, when he wore nothing. But now he looked like a pen-



guin on stilts who had left off his breast piece.

“Oh, buy him a *boubou!*” advised the chief of the Governor’s council, when the officials remonstrated with me for letting him go about in such a rig.

“I only bought what you let them sell,” I protested.

“Well, then, why don’t you give him a cuirassier’s helmet, too?”

That was an idea! There was one, sure enough, in the market. But, unfortunately, my boy thought the horsehair tail wasn’t thick enough.

Where on earth does all the junk they sell these poor negroes come from? Scissors the prongs of which don’t meet; knives that won’t cut; mirrors that reflect nothing; soaps that make no lather; perfumes without odor; combs without teeth; candles without wicks; oh, one might almost say flutes without stops! What factories are these that turn out such goods because they are good enough for one of the great divisions of the world?

Trade goods. . . .

IN Bamako are more than twenty thousand Sou-
danese. France has created a great town there — out
of mud. No hut is larger than any other. The city
stretches out like a cemetery for paupers, or a mili-
tary burying ground, where all are equal. Above the
walls surrounding these huts one may see, rising and
falling rhythmically, an instrument symbolic of all
Africa: the long rod that is used in pounding grain.
It looks like the slightly bent piston rod of a machine
that is never still, the prehistoric machine that sup-
plies the food of an accursed race.

Why haven't we built mills to grind the grain
and hull the rice? Simply because the men want
nothing of this sort — nor the mothers-in-law.

"I've worked all my life — why should his wife
have it easy?" asks the old woman. As for the hus-
band's idea:

"At Gao a captain built a mill with three fine
pestles that ground the grain beautifully. He called
the head men together and explained this miracle to
them. Astonishing! But the chief said: " 'Yes, but
what will our wives do now?'"



Progress was condemned. There was no answer. The women work in Bamako.

Twenty thousand blacks live there, all on the ground, and the only sound is that of the heavy rods pounding the wooden mortars. Afternoon. No men to be seen among the huts. They serve as boys for the whites, or, perhaps, they are busy paying taxes in kind, by digging the Sotuba canal, from the other side of Nigeria, or working on the roads. Some act as porters; some, the really knowing ones, lie spread out voluptuously on the hot soil of their fatherland, digging their toenails into the dust.

When I walked in the native town I heard only a single cry breaking the universal silence; that of the little seller of kola nuts.

“Aye na vo san!” she repeated.

I asked her her name. She didn’t answer. I gave her ten sous. “Aisata,” she said, then. And when I offered her another coin she was bashful about taking it, since, she said, she had only one name!

Then there was the place where they cured meats; a great court full of noise. A rifleman was raising the devil in the courtyard. He talked like



an angry general haranguing his troops. His speech was a mixture of his native dialect and French; French words, to be sure, but not such words as one hears in a drawing room. Whoever taught him our language didn't rob him. He might have been a pupil of the last of the old fiacre drivers of Paris! The rascal! He was looking for one of his compatriots to take him before the commandant; his victim didn't want to go. Suddenly he dealt him two blows — I could feel them myself, ten paces away! The other didn't move; didn't hit back. The negro received those cuffs as if they were his due. His two wives kept on grinding meal; his dog never stopped looking for fleas.

“Service — service!” shouted the rifleman.

The moment a black has any authority he becomes savage toward his own kind. He thrashes them, ransacks their houses, eats their grain, drinks their *bangui*, seduces their daughters. Oh, a chastity belt is worth a lot on the banks of the Niger!

It grew dark. I turned toward the Soudan Club. I was thirsty. I had found out why the colonial



glasses had been invented; it is because in that country one's lips are always dry.

“Do you know what Bamako means?” a white man asked me, as soon I had arranged my admission to the club — without which I would have been unable to drink; for one who doesn't belong to the Soudan Club has no other rights except to die of thirst. “It means the business of the crocodiles.”

“Ah!” I said, beginning to drink.

“Yes, the crocodile is the fetich of Bamako. He protects the town. As he has rendered great service, the head men, before we came, used to give him a young virgin to eat every year. It was a great occasion.”

“And now? They no longer give him one?”

“Not officially, no.”

We ordered another drink.

v

THE BICYCLE BARBER

“**G**OOD morning, Monsieur the newcomer! I am Tartass’. You can’t present yourself at the Governor’s without passing through my hands first. Look at them, feel them. They are expert and soft. They’re not chapped. A little large, perhaps, but I have worked so much! And aren’t my nails splendid? I am Tartass’. Just a touch of the clippers on the back of your neck? Let my scissors wander around your ears — you’ll be a new man, handsome to look at! Oh, I tell you, I’m a type! There’s not another



like me in the Soudan. M. Armand Fallières, my countryman, knows that very well. I've written to him about it. I come from Mezin. Tartass' and Fallières were born at Mezin. They make corks there, big ones for carafes, middle sized ones for bottles, little ones for flasks. Whatever comes from Mezin is of the best. Ah, but I am content — content!

“I've a head on my shoulders, let me tell you — and what good will! Not educated, maybe. Not as polished as some, I grant you, but I'm wiry — oh, I've astonished some people in my time! I aspire — I aspire. I've always aspired. That's my secret. Nothing is beyond the reach of Tartass'! And how I love the world — which resembles me. I am good, I have understanding, but don't get the idea that I'm mad or extravagant. The man who can unbutton my coat has yet to be born. Any one can see my purse — but no one dares touch it. The whole colony regards it respectfully, by now. People regard me with an envious eye. That pleases me. Ah, I am content — I am very well pleased!

“I am extremely popular. But, even so, they don't know Tartass' yet. Every one salutes me, all



the way from Kayes to Bamako. But what they salute is only my outward manifestation, my fame, my past, my present, my future. The man I am, his deeper personality, evades my contemporaries. They certainly suspect something, but they can't see the truth. I transgress by knowing too much — I know that very well — but I have depths. And depth is what is needed here in the colony, always depth and more depth. To understand my worth properly, measure the distance between the point of zero at which I began and the superb position I enjoy today! Go for a walk, and ask to see my houses. There are five of them. All earned sou by sou, shave by shave, haircut by haircut. Ah, yes, I'm well pleased! I am living proof that a Frenchman who comes to the colony, who eats sparingly, who doesn't drink, who doesn't indulge in the siesta, will prosper, become rich, and end by becoming a superman! But that's nothing to make a fuss about. Above all, no pride — no pride! So you gain strength, but concentrate. Be neither generous, nor vain, nor luxurious. Always be serious — do nothing for the gallery."



“Have done!” I said. “What do you want with me?”

“I am Tartass’. You see before you a millionaire barber. I can’t tell you all the people with whom I’ve done business, but I have cared for the heads of Marshal Pétain, Colonel de Goys, the Duke of Aosta, Pelletier Doisy. A fine fellow, that. He wouldn’t go off without having coffee with me. In Paris, nineteen years ago now, I cut the hair of M. Aristide Briand, at 31, Rue de Dunquerque. Ah, if he only knew what I’d made of myself since those days! I shaved M. Marcel Hutin in the Rue des Beaux Arts. He always smoked vile cigars. He’d have smoked much better ones if he had followed my example. But every one can’t be Tartass’. Except for me, what would you see here in the Soudan? Untrimmed beards, hair like Red Indians, and, among the best people, hair falling out! What a fine sight that would have been for the delegates of the League of Nations who were out here last year! What a splendid notion they’d have taken home with them of the figure France was cutting on the banks of the Niger! But Tartass’ was here — all was



saved. Oh, I am content — very much content!"

He was a clumsy fellow, with stumpy legs, huge in the calf, with a figure like the back of a horse. He wore riding breeches, but no gaiters; an officer's jacket; for the rest, he had turned up at the Buffet de Bamako without sun-glasses, without a helmet, and riding a bicycle, at three o'clock in the afternoon! Now I remembered; they'd told me about him.

"You're going to the Soudan? Then you'll see Tartass'," I had been told. Even on the ship Tartass' had been famous.

"There are barbers and barbers. I knew already the difference between the barbers one finds in town and those in the country. I have invented the colonial barber! What is he? A man with a good digestion, who knows how one catches fever, and doses against it so that he kills it. One who likes the climate. I have no shop. I am the bicycle barber, the perambulating barber, as they used to say. Some one calls me on the telephone and says: 'Tartass', go up to Kouolouba and cut the Governor's hair!' At once I leap into the saddle; I ride five kilometers. Tartass' reaches Kouolouba.



“I won’t say the colony could get along without a governor, but certainly the Governor couldn’t get along without Tartass’. Ah, I am content, I! Not to be afraid of distances, that’s the secret of success. I go to officiate at Kayes, five hundred kilometers from home. Yes, monsieur — Tartass’ does that. Going and coming, I shave and cut hair on the train. Understand this — Tartass’ is the hope of all the brush dwellers from Timbuctoo to Dakar. Two months ahead of time they say to themselves: ‘If only Tartass’ is on the train!’ And there he is, clippers in his hand, scissors in his belt, razor between his teeth! From station to station, from compartment to compartment, the length of the line, his name flies. It flies like a moth, symbol of hope. The bearded are shaved — the hairy ones are transfigured.”

“So, then, you are happy?”

“Am I happy? That’s good — that’s rich! I can tell you I am! Ah, but I did well to become a cuckold, very well! Without that incident, what would Tartass’ be to-day? A brush boy in a Parisian barber shop! I would have passed my life calling:



‘Next, gentlemen? Next?’ It was nineteen years ago, in the Rue Mazagran, near the Grands Boulevards. I had a shop; observe that even then Tartass’ was enterprising. I had just come back from fitting a wig to a client in the neighborhood, and I found my wife in the ladies’ parlor on the knees of my shop assistant.

“What did Tartass’ do, Tartass’, who adored his wife? He went into exile. He took the first ship. He put the sea between himself and the object of his grief. I came to Dakar. I accepted a modest position on the railway. One day the director sent for me and said: ‘Tartass’, you’re an idiot — you’re fired!’ I was in despair again. Did you hear what I said? That man, in his folly, said to me: ‘Tartass’, you’re an idiot! And now — what is Tartass’? A millionaire, monsieur — a millionaire, highly esteemed, as sane as any one, healthy in mind as in body, and the owner of five houses in the open sunlight!”

“Certainly they couldn’t be in the shade in this country!”

“I am happy in duty accomplished, proud of



the future I can count upon. All is well — Tartass' tells you so! Oh, I'm content!"

"Well, will you cut my hair for me?"

"As no one else could!"

I took him to my room.

"Now that you know Tartass'," he continued, "you may hear the news. I shall be a candidate in the elections. I am canvassing for the office of colonial delegate for the Soudan and the Haute-Volta to the Supreme Colonial Council. My committee includes the most important people in Bamako. They sought me out and said: 'Tartass', we must have a standard bearer.' So I made my dispositions. I stand against that worthy deputy of Indre-et-Loire, M. Proust. He came here in an airplane. And no one dared raise his head to look at him — except I. But I, I said to him: 'Here is your opponent — have a good look at him!' I defied the lightning. I shall be elected. I have eyes, ears, a sense of smell. Tartass' sees, hears, smells. And, besides —"

He was passing the clippers over the nape of my neck. He stopped the clippers and was still. As this silence continued, I turned to look at him.



He put out his tongue and pointed to it with a finger.

“Are you thirsty?” I asked him.

“No,” he said, “but I have a tongue, too, the tongue of an orator. Ah, I am well pleased with myself!”

He took my own bottle of Cologne and massaged me.

“A five franc rub or a ten franc treatment?” he asked.

I pointed out to him that the Cologne belonged to me.

“It’s hot, to-day,” he said. “I’ll give you a rub for ten francs.”

I learned later that he always worked that way.

“Millionaire, politician, defender both of whites and of blacks — for the native, take Tartass’ word for it, is less of a scoundrel than we French — it is so, after nineteen years of exile, that I shall soon return to the city of Paris!”

“Good — *au revoir*, there, then!” I said.

He remounted his bicycle.

“I shall be elected — nothing to that, since I,



Tartass', tell you so! Oh, everything goes well — I'm satisfied!"

"Tartass' didn't fool you," the leading men of Bamako told me, that same evening. "He really is a millionaire, and we are putting him up for election. Unfortunately, we're not very hopeful, though. The colony can't take a joke. In the old days he'd have swept all before him, but then, in the old days, we had some spirit here, and knew how to amuse ourselves. Hold on, though — can't you help out this little fantasy?"

Next day I left Bamako. I was to travel through the Soudan and the Haute-Volta. You might have seen, on the back of my car, a large white sheet, inscribed:

VOTE FOR TARTASS'!

All Goes Well! All goes well!

I am Happy — Oh, so Happy!

THE BANANA MOTOR

BLACKS of both sexes were working on the road. Linked together, as if they waited a partner to play leapfrog, they tapped it with a lath. There were two rows, one of men, one of women. The women were old and ugly, their skins shriveled so that they looked like skeletons. Evidently, they were no longer of any use — except for the road.

Beside the trail was an orchestra: three drums and a flute. To supply the rhythm for the road makers, the musicians played an air, rising and fall-



ing in common time, on four notes, from dawn till dark. The most peaceful of dogs would have been driven mad by that tune!

Another gang came and went, stones on their heads, some carrying only one, some three or four, in a little basket, a basket made to hold a dozen eggs.

FROM the stoneyard to the heap of stones was five hundred meters. Each stone, each basket, meant a kilometer's tramp. You will tell me that in these times of ours there are steam rollers, automobile trucks, even hand carts. And I will tell you that you've only dreamed of such things! In any case, if you can find them in the stables of the colonial administration tell me where — I'll run to look for them!

An airplane passes, sometimes, over black Africa. That's all very well; that is a machine that makes time. But as for a steam roller! Every one has seen one. Nothing moves more slowly. Some one told me such a machine was on the way. It must have left France twenty-eight years ago. Good! It will come,



in time. Meanwhile, if you chance upon it, hurry it along a little. The blacks will bless you.

They have tried wheelbarrows; I must admit that. The wheelbarrow, discovered in Pascal's day, has had time to make the trip. But, unhappily, Mandingue, Peuhl, Bambara, Sonrai, Mossi, Gourmantche, Berba, Toucouleur, the sons of darkness, have never known how to make use of a wheel. Wheelbarrows were unsteady; they turned over. So the negroes picked them up and carried them on their heads. That is what they still do. Three drums and a flute! When the music stops, so does the work. Then the black overseer starts all again with his whip. They are prisoners, you see.

Yes. Precisely. Prisoners. In Africa slavery is abolished only in the official pronouncements of the chancelleries of Europe.

England, France, Italy, Spain, Belgium, Portugal, send representatives to their parliaments. They say: "Slavery is suppressed. Our laws attest to that." Officially, yes. In fact — no!

Remember. Only eight months ago a London dispatch in the French newspapers announced that



England had just freed 230,000 prisoners in Sierra Leone. So there were some then? There still are — and those 230,000 are among them. That is not all there are. They call them house prisoners. That phrase isn't just an expression, a remnant of the past; it points to a stark fact. In the native speech they answer to the name of *ouolosos*, which means: born in the hut. They belong to the chief, like cows and other animals. The chief rules them, feeds them. He gives them a wife or two. So the couples produce little *ouolosos*.

Formerly, they were prisoners of the trade. When the European Powers suppressed the trade — officially — did they at the same time suppress the slaves? The slaves stayed where they were, that is, with those who had bought them. They merely changed their names; instead of being prisoners of the trade, they became prisoners of the huts; they were born as Ga-Bibis, as they call the children of serfs. They are negroes who belong to negroes. The masters no longer have the right to sell them. So — they exchange them. Above all, they see to it that they have children. A slave is no longer



bought; he reproduces himself. You have a domestic incubator!

FRANCE did try to solve the problem. She established, in the Soudan, about 1910, free villages. Our envoys traveled through the brush, recruiting, then, not for the army, but for a principle. We came back with game from those democratic hunts. We installed our game in our villages. Imagine how pleased the negroes were to regard the statue of the Republic! Seeds were given to the newly emancipated; they ate them, instead of planting them. Those who managed to survive sought nothing, in their turn, except to enslave others. The former chiefs were dissatisfied. They had bought them their wives; now they came to reclaim these women. To make a long story short, they found their former slaves, and, with a blow from a faggot, in the names of the local gods, they inculcated in those ingrates, with a few lashes, a salutary dread of change and a respect for tradition.

France did her best. She posted sentries around



the free villages, to keep the liberated ones from returning to slavery. But she went no further than that.

You can still find these Gardens of Eden. They're like ant hills. The hovels have become heaps of mud. In one of them, near Kita, at Dyambourou-bourou, there was only one old man left. The child of freedom was bent over like a charcoal seller who has climbed to the sixth floor, his fifty kilos on his back.

Africa is still enslaved. For every free man there are fifteen *ouolosos*. As life among the negroes goes these *ouolosos*, though, are not so badly off. They hunt for water, they cultivate lougan, and when their master doesn't know what other use to make of them he tells them: "Go on — get out for six months, do as you please as long as you bring back your taxes to me." In theory, they work four days for their master; the other three they stretch, scratch their feet, rub their bellies. But these are details; let's get down to business. It's when the white men appear that the matter becomes serious.

Now, when you speak of the white man in Africa

you speak of government. Government is the negro's nightmare. It never ceases to threaten his leisure — he who loves so to sleep.

“Stand up there — stand up! Fifty men for my commandant!”

That's the militiaman. A bridge must be rebuilt, a road laid, something of the sort. The chief won't send his relatives or his sons. So he sends his slaves.

“March, then — let's go!” says the soldier, who is just as black as the rest of them. “Come on — be off with you!”

They call that payment in kind. Every black, in default of paying taxes, must render seven or fifteen days of such service each year. It's the slaves who actually do the work. According to the white law, no man is liable for more than fifteen days; according to the negro custom, the slave — only he is a prisoner, remember, not a slave — owes fifteen days, plus fifteen, plus fifteen more . . . as many as the others do not render. So every one is happy. The white law is humane, and the customs of Africa are respected.

It's these prisoners who are enlisted in the



army. And, in time of war, very often, their masters, failing other relatives, collect their pay allotments.

Prisoners make up the working gangs. I know of one that was maintained for two years, that which dug the Sotuba canal. Prisoners built and are building the railways of Senegambia, Guinea, the Ivory Coast, Togoland, the Soudan, Dahomey. And of the Congo! Oh, we shall come to the Congo! Be patient; we shall be very hot, but we shall have something to show for it.

The money paid to prisoners goes to their chiefs. They build the roads and keep them in repair. They have carried me, as well as my trunks and my bags. Oh, my poor old pigskin valise certainly looked odd as it swung through the forest on Mamadou's head!

Prisoners cross the plains, day after day, bearing a load of thirty kilos of tapioca, followed by their wives and children, chanting a mournful litany as they go to revictual the stoneyards of civilization. A motor truck would do the work better. But gasoline has risen again to dizzy heights of price, while



there are plenty of bananas. The prisoner is a motor driven by banana fuel.

If there are no more men in a village, and still more are needed, then the chiefs send the old *ouolosos* and the young Ga-Bibis. After the old men and the children, they send the women. Not, of course, the young slave women, but the old ones, the ones who have dried out, the ones whose skin hasn't been renewed for a long time. They make use of everything and every one in Africa.

VII

BETWEEN 1800 AND 1900

Soudan!

In the brush you think of something, abruptly. The country, the natives, vanish, for a moment, from your sight. There is a screen between you and reality. And on the screen you see written:

“Conquest!”

The shakos, the neckcloths! The soldiers of France! Crushed between the sun that beats down and the broiling ground, the victorious column marched on. It laid out the road I followed. Pick-



axes sank into the ground, shovels turned it over, sweat ran. In that heat the skin was chapped, the lips were cracked, as if by intense cold. The *harman-tan*, the wind of the Soudan, blew, and dried the very mucous membranes of throat and nose.

You remember hearing some one say, in Kayes: "Wait — look at Archinard's room." It was a rabbit hutch. At Kita they showed you a chicken run. "That's where Joffre lived when he was here!" Yesterday your black chauffeur, stopping suddenly in a village, told you: "Look! Gallieni was in jail for two years in Ahmadou's stockade." Two years the prisoner of Ahmadou, the son of Omar! Seven hundred days behind the bars in this ant heap, since, before his time, only ants had worked in that country! You heard, too, at Kabara, one time, that one must stop, on the way to Timbuctoo, to see the place where, near the ragweed, tree of rags, Gouraud received his first dried plum.

I remembered a pyramid, overgrown and broken off, in the brush, on which I had read: "Erected by the French Colonists As a Tribute to Captain Gallieni, to Lieutenants Vallière and Pietri, to Doc-



tors Tantam and Bayol." And a solitary tombstone marked: "Ge . rges G . iva . . r . Lieutenant of Spahis of the S . . dan, Killed by the Enemy at the age of 28." There were cemeteries, planted with weeping trees. "Pelabon, Lieutenant of the 5th Engineers, dead at Bafoulabe, aged 28." There was one stone on which everything had been worn away except "26 years old." Another: "We, whose comrade in arms he was, remember him." The name had vanished; only his age — 25 — remained. Hanging by thousands from the branches of the trees, bats covered these stones with a foul snow, eternally renewed.

All that was between 1880 and 1900. Our colonists....

IN those days Ahmadou, Habibou, Moktar and Mountaga divided among themselves the empire of the Hadji Omar, their father. Those were the names of the handsome sons of the Emperor Toucouleur. Ahmadou killed Habibou and Moktar. As for Mountaga, he took to flight when he saw Ahmadou approaching his camp. Ahmadou reigned alone.

“Ho! What a great reign that was!” said the old negroes, who could remember. “He took our fathers, our mothers, the children . . .”

“And ate them all up?”

“Oh, he didn’t eat much of them!”

Over a territory greater than that of France, Ahmadou roamed as a brigand.

Segou became a vast bowling alley. Heads rolled the whole year round as bowls do on the day of a tournament. He was the greatest bowler of his time!

As for us, we were much farther south, fishing in the Senegal. But these heads finally rolled between our legs. Falling into the water, they frightened the fish. The situation became intolerable. We abandoned our fishing lines and took up our guns.

The Governor of Senegambia was Brière de l’Isle.

“Not so fast,” he said to the soldier-anglers. “Put up your rifles. I shall send some one to His Majesty Ahmadou to tell him a thing or two.”

He sent Paul Soleillet. Ahmadou was a gentleman. He offered *bangui* to our ambassador, and the ambassador drank it. But then he offered him meat,



and the ambassador cautiously refused it. Negotiations were broken off. M. Soleillet returned.

The heads continued to roll down.

As some of them contained those little worms so well known to the fish, the anglers were vexed. This time Brière de l'Isle said: "I'll send Captain Gallieni to see him." Gallieni went. Ahmadou imprisoned him. No one was greatly worried about our envoy; the illustrious marshal, as is well remembered, was always a thin man. Still! The procedure was changed.

Borgnis-Desbordes installed his headquarters at Medine. Archinard arrived. Conquest! Shakos! Neck-cloths! The column....

The sun, that old man-eater, couldn't contain his delight. He had white flesh to eat — and he ate it until it burst the seams of his jacket! The Marines passed, with their coats and their canvas bands. The sun swallowed them, digested them. Those who escaped advanced. Ahmadou retreated and changed his stamping ground. He was followed, and driven from Segou and Nioro. Then, in succession, from San, from Dienne, from Mopti. He went to earth

among the hills of Bandiagara. He was chased from there. It took thirteen years to dispose of him, but it was done at last. Toucouleur's empire had vanished.

BUT there was Mandingue's empire, too! Samori. What a fine bird that was! He was the Tchang Tso Lin of Africa, a black Attila. This human gorilla had been born a Ga-Bibi. He was a slave in Sori. Become a peddler instead of a slave, he marched up, like all the others, from the Gold Coast, his pack of kola nuts on his head. One evening when he was in the humor, as he sold his nuts at Torongo, he cast a spell upon the king, His Majesty Bitiki. He became the chieftain of Bitiki's bands. Then he set the king to traveling the road to the Gold Coast in his place, and, that accomplished, he dragged the throne forward and seated himself upon it. It is such dreams that negroes dream!

First of all he stretched out his hand to the states bordering upon his own. They made up the kingdom of Ouassoulou, of which he proclaimed himself king. Twice a king, and drunker than ever! It even seems that Samori, although a Moslem, didn't



content himself with "eating only a little of father and mother." He devoured them whole! And, as he was very hungry, the double king crossed the Niger. He entered Mandingue. There he said: "I am Emperor!" The rejoicings were redoubled.

Borgnis-Desbordes, Frey, Boyleve, Combe, marched, each in his turn, against this man of a formidable appetite. He waved his fork joyfully. They drove him from Kita to Bamako, from Bamako to Bakoy. Peroz, Humbert, Archinard, took part in the game. Driven from his states, he went to proclaim himself king at Kong, and selected the Lobi to supply himself with fresh meat. Braulet followed him with a mission. He massacred the mission, and perhaps Braulet, too. Caudrelier drove him into the woods. Finally he was caught between the two hands of Captain Gouraud. In those days, you see Gouraud still had two hands.

Nowadays, I go about as I please in the Soudan, a cigarette between my lips. Ahmadou won't put me in prison, nor Samori in his soup kettle. Walking through the towns, I look at the names of the streets. Rue Gallieni, Rue Archinard, Rue Binger. There was

another man! He set out all alone, dressed like a peddler, carrying his pack of trash. He reconnoitered the road. One day he left his comrades. He didn't turn up for two years and a half — and then it was on the lagoons of the Ivory Coast. One can still find the spot; it is called Bingerville.

There is the street named for Lieutenant-Commander Boiteux. He entered Timbuctoo before Bonnier, before Joffre. He got himself massacred there; so, later, did Bonnier. So there is a Rue Bonnier. Lieutenant-Commander Mage was killed on the Niger. Rue Mage. Rue Baratier.

Voulet and Chanoine gave France the Mossi empire — now one of the eight colonies of French West Africa, which we call the Haute-Volta. With fifty men they sent three thousand horsemen of Morho-Naba to prance elsewhere. They entered Ouagadougou.

Learning that, and, no doubt, a few other little things, the government sent Commandant Kolb after them, to reprimand them. They killed him. So — there is no Rue Voulet-Chanoine. Chanoine, they say, still roams the Sahara, dressed like a Touareg.



That time has gone. Joffre promised Cheboune, chief of the Tengueriguiffs, that he should be saluted by a cannon every time he entered Timbuctoo.

Every one forgot that.

It was the land of audacity, of enterprise, of youth.

All that vast conquest was unplanned. The Minister knew nothing until it was all over. The advances were those of individuals. When men came back to report a success, Paris put them under arrest for twenty days. Luckily, they never arrested themselves!

VIII

THE HALF-BREEDS

“**W**HAT are thirty-three years? I recall, as if it were yesterday . . .”

It was a general, whose name is famous, who wrote this letter to the commandant at Timbuctoo:

“I have never stopped remembering those old days. Ah, my Soudan! What has become of my little hut near Fort Bonnier? Where is my sweetheart — my son? He was such a fine youngster — he was called Robert. He is a man now. Where is he? I’ve always asked my comrades who come back from those



parts ; they know nothing about him. His mother was called Aissa ; she came from the village of Kabara. His grandfather was a Senegalese soldier in our service. I should be deeply grateful to you . . . ”

The half-breeds !

This is from a letter of another general :

“ You will remember that in 1904 I buried, in the cemetery at M — , near the fort, a child. On the tombstone I put only : Henri. If the sand hasn’t covered it completely, could you . . . ? ”

Just Robert. Just Henri. Just André. The half-breeds — the *mulots* (field mice) !

The babies suckle their negro mothers.

The father is there — or he is gone. He is an official, a trader, an officer ; a bird of passage. If he is there, it is not for long. If he is away — probably it is forever. The child grows up in the ancestral hut, the mother having gone back to her people. The rest of the village will look upon him as an outcast, asking why this outsider must, later on, share their grain. No social considerations enter into this summary judgment ; it is purely instinctive. He is neither black nor white, so he is nothing at all.



The mother will marry again — a Mandinguese. His half brothers will have a race, a family, a father-land; they will be black. The *mulot* will be a *mulot*. He will have no name, no ground he can call his own. Even the breast that feeds him is only half his own. He will spend his life looking for the other half of himself. When you see them as young children they don't stand straight; they lean first to one side, then to the other. They are the misfit garments turned out by a tailor in too much of a hurry. Those who receive them never forget that they weren't made to measure. They become floaters.

They are like the toy boats that sail in the ponds in a park. When they near the bank a stick pushes them away; in the center a fountain swamps them. Most of them die early. The survivors are marked and tainted.

Without a name, these half-breeds are the sons of the saints of the Catholic Church. The Republic does not leave them in the brush. Oh, no! When they are seven years old they are torn from their mothers. They are gathered in centers, at half-breed schools.



They are orphans of the strangest type; orphans who have fathers and mothers.

As long as their fathers are in Africa they do not abandon them. When they happen to be near the school they go to see their sons, even when they have returned from their last vacation, married to "Madame White."

You may see these half-breeds in the best houses, seated between their fathers and their fathers' wives. The Colonial breaks the news gently, on the way out, on the ship, to his wife. Frenchwomen understand that such affairs are commonplace in the colony, and, as they are often intelligent, receive the child kindly during their stay.

When there are white children the little *mulot* is shown the door again. Poor *mulots!* The black children of their mother are not their brothers, nor are the white children of their father. I wonder if that is why they all have such big eyes — because they have tried so hard to understand how this can be? Those whose fathers have gone, and who have accomplished nothing at school, are to be found back in the villages again. The mother, by that time, is old:



She is only a negress in a black land. The child has only a first name.

“Hello!” says a passing white man. “That’s So-and-So’s boy.” And he gives him ten sous.

If it is a girl, and she is pretty, the whites amuse themselves with her, and give her — five francs, not ten sous.

Some are luckier. Joseph still has his father. He eats with him every evening, at Mother Vaiselle’s, and sits beside me. His father is a cocoa buyer. All the boarders know Joseph; they pat him as they pass by. At nine o’clock, the cocoa buyer puts him to bed. Joseph is happy. He doesn’t know yet that there are ships that carry white fathers back to France.

As they grow older the men become teachers, the girls midwives. Teachers and midwives intermarry. The weddings are sometimes magnificent when the midwife happens to be the governor’s daughter. . . . But such happy endings are as rare as a cool day.

The half-breed is profoundly unhappy.

School makes him, spiritually, a Frenchman; the law sees to it that he is, socially, a native. The



law, at the age of twenty, swallows him up in the black army. A negro, born at Dakar, at Rufisque, at Saint-Louis or at Gorée, is a French citizen. The son of General X——, of the governor, of the head of the administration, of a great engineer, is a negro! If he breaks the law he is punished like a negro; when he gets a job he is paid like a negro, only not so well.

A black voter who is an official is paid nine francs a day; the half-breeds receive two and a half francs. There is a bonus of a hundred francs for each black child; the half-breed, siring a baby, receives ten francs! Suppose he knocks at the door of a government office? He is received like a negro. If it so happens that a Dakar negro wields the penholder he is chivvied out like a dog.

Henri, who is by way of being a wit, told me: "We ought to be all buttocks — we'd be easier to kick!"

The dregs of the four communes send a deputy to the Seine; the half-breed stays in Nigeria. He is neither white nor black, neither French nor African,



YOUNG SOUDANESE GIRL

neither woolly nor straight-haired. Unfortunately, however, he persists in being something.

“If I were nobody,” Robert remarked to me, “I wouldn’t suffer. But, look!”

Robert had taken me home with him, to a nice little dwelling in Mopti. Robert opened the sideboard and pulled out the drawers. I thought he was about to lay the cloth and ask me to dine.

“Look! We eat from plates, we use knives, forks, spoons. We drink from glasses!”

“And that photograph?” I said, pointing to a picture of a general, on the wall, cut from an illustrated paper.

“That’s my father!”

They have been abandoned. Down there they think nothing of that; it seems natural to them. They have a vague idea that they are not children, at all, but accidents, and that an accident is always unfortunate. They have all been sent to school, where they have learned to say that they are the sons of Gaul. They have been made to wear shoes, shirts, trousers. They have added spectacles themselves. It



would have been well to see to it that they did not learn to read, if there was any wish to keep them from seeing the names of their fathers in the newspapers!

They have no desire, however, to claim any share of such renown as their fathers may enjoy. They have a lively sense of their plight. They know that they represent original sin, and they are disposed to blame Adam rather than his progeny. Still, they harbor the idea of redeeming themselves. Knowing the respect due to true whites, they assert no rights as the sons of their fathers. They do not covet the name of being white — no, far from being so bold, they seek only French nationality. They do not hope to be known as the son of an individual — only as the son of a Frenchman. So they themselves confirm their own anonymity.

André, Henri, Jacques, Robert, as much as you please — but French citizens. That is their dream.

“Above all,” they say, “let it be known that we are the sons of the conquerors. It was hard that in the time of triumph our fathers could not bring their women back with them.”



Enough of tragedy!

A plan is pigeon-holed in the Palais-Bourbon. Professor Girault drew it up. A deputy, if you please, even though he be not a Colonial, to take that plan to the tribunal!

THE HOME OF THE GOD
OF THE BRUSH

THE center of the brush is the commandant.

This is something you must listen to as I intend to explain it.

The brush is an endless field, not planted with trees, but, seemingly, with scourges, their handles stuck in the ground, their branches all in bloom. This is the country of Father Fouettard.

Suddenly, after two hundred kilometers, you see a house in your way.

The house is so carefully placed that a badly driven car need only keep straight on to land in its dining room. Then you need only say: "The menu, if you please!"

Its tenant is an administrator; a civilian. The negroes call him "My commandant."

The brush has as many centers as it has commandants. In general, there is nothing to choose among them. When they are inhabited it is by lions, hyenas, panthers, chimpanzees, wild pigs, antelopes, and other little creatures of that sort. Robert Poulaïne, who follows my profession, has even met hippopotami there.

The commandant is the god of the brush. Without him, you would have to sleep outdoors, and the hyenas would come and lick the soles of your shoes, and, as the tongues of hyenas are rough, you would soon be barefoot.

When you arrive you say: "Good evening, Monsieur the Administrator!" Then you drink his cocktails, you make free with his store of tinned foods, you sleep in his bed. Others, plenty of them, have



done so before you. In the morning you go on without even asking his name. It's the custom of the brush.

A hundred negroes are always clustered about these residences. At first I looked at them without much interest. In the end I asked one of the commandants: "What do they want of you, these birds?"

I was about to learn. Seated beside the administrator, in his office, this is what I saw and heard:

"Bema!"

Bema was the interpreter.

"Let them in, one at a time."

Bema shouted. All rose. The first came in.

"Come on — speak your piece!"

"My commandant," the negro began, "you are my father and my mother." He said so much in French; then relapsed into the idiom.

"What's he saying?" asked the commandant.

"He says that two years ago he lent four cows to Nialebe, at Sao; that these four cows had four calves; that Nialebe says now that they had only two calves."

"Where is Nialebe?"

“At Sao.”

“Let him go and find him.”

“Is that far away?” I asked.

“No—a hundred and twenty kilometers.”

They gave the negro a stamped paper, and, quite content, he set off for Sao. The next one came in. He was big and strong, and looked agreeable.

“Well, stupid, what do you want?”

“He says his wife has run away.”

“What’s he expect me to do about that? Anyway, what more has he to worry about?”

“He says his wife was naughty, that yesterday she didn’t grind the meal, and he chastised her. She insulted him by calling his mother names. So he cuffed her.”

All this in the patois the negroes speak.

“Why does he come to me with this tale?”

“He says you must make his wife come back to him, since he gave a young goat, four hens and half a leg of mutton for her.”

“Ask him what he did with the other half.”

“He says the other half was quite bad, and that he ate it, because he’s fond of it that way.”



“Tell him he’s a worthless scoundrel and to get out!”

“Get out, you!” ordered the interpreter.

The negro went out and sat down again before the house, waiting for a more auspicious occasion. Another came in.

“He says he is the one who came here three weeks ago because Samba had killed his canary.”

“Well?”

“He says you told him to ask Samba for thirty centimes, and that he did, and that Samba gave them to him.”

“Well, what more does he want, then?”

“He says he wants nothing more, that he came to tell you, that’s all.”

Six days on the road to come, six days to go home again! And still people will tell you that the negroes are lazy! The next.

“He wants to know if you remember him.”

“A fine chance!” said the commandant.

“He says that a year ago you told him to go to Abecher . . .”

(I made a calculation; that meant a journey of three thousand kilometers.)

“... to collect a debt of three hundred francs.”

“Well?”

“He went to Abecher. The one who owed him three hundred francs was dead. He has come back. [Six thousand kilometers.] That’s what he has to tell you.”

“Where is he from?”

“From San.”

“Ah! From San, eh? Ask him if he is tired.”

“He’s not tired.”

“Well, let him go back to San at once, then. There’s this pouch to be taken to the commandant there.”

The interpreter put the pouch on the head of the citizen of San.

“Do you understand what he said? You’re to take this pouch to the commandant at San. You are to run.”

The negro stood still, bewildered.

“If you don’t like it you can go to jail!”



Jail! All the blacks know that word.

“I’ll do it,” he said.

Carrying his load, he took to the road again for another little walk of three hundred kilometers.

We had noticed a woman outside.

“Bring in the wench, Bema.”

If you will concede that a calico band around the hips and a gourd on top of the head don’t constitute a costume, she was naked. She was young, too. She had come from Ke, twelve days distant.

“Had she any money?” I asked.

She said she had had no money.

“Then how did she travel?”

She had stopped every night in a village, put down her gourd, and had it filled. Her name was Kisili.

“And when the chief was not too old Kisili paid for her food in her own fashion — eh?”

“Grou!” said Kisili, to whom that was translated. “Grou! Grou!”

She was amused.

“Very good. What does she want?”

“She says her husband has beaten her and stolen

the clothes that a white man married to her sister gave her."

"Twelve days on the road to tell me that! Let her go back to her husband or I'll put her in jail!"

Kisili replaced her gourd on her head and went back to her husband.

"Now let the old fellow come in."

He was dignified, and saluted us with his hand.

"Get on with it," said the commandant.

He said that the month before he had sent his wife to carry grain to the village of Ma. A man there had taken her from him. He had found the man, who told him that another man, from Tebi, had stolen her from him.

"Well, and you want your wife, do you?"

"Yes."

"And suppose these two others have given her a disease?"

He smiled.

"She'd still be a woman!" he said.

"Go and sit down again. We'll see about it."

Another old man, who needed no interpreter.

"My commandant—greetings! Greetings to



Madame your wife! I have come to tell you that my wife is running loose all through the village."

"How old are you?"

"Sixty."

"And your wife?"

"Eighteen."

"She's to be excused. You must understand these things, you who are so intelligent."

"I am very intelligent, and I do understand. But why must she bring her lovers to my house? Do you understand, my commandant? In their houses, yes — not in mine. After all, that seems fair!"

"That's all you want, then?"

"Yes. Except that I think she ought to grind my meal for me, too. She's very strong — she could easily give pleasure to the others and prepare my food, too, without tiring herself."

"Tell her to obey you or I'll put her in jail."

"Good, commandant! Au revoir! Thank you!"

They let a soldier come in. He arrived on bare feet; coming to attention he cried: "Fisque!"

He took a letter concealed under his girdle and held it out. The commandant read it:

“My commandant, you who are more powerful than God, you who are worthy of the Bastille, I say to you: Take my wife, since, as for me, I am going to Casablanca. Keep her until I return from my military service. Put her in jail. Her father is Tianti Calla Sakabu, her mother Perai Dao. I am Patomo Faraole. Please see to it that the soldiers don’t violate her. I salute you, I grovel respectfully before you, and I sign myself, with happy and satisfied desires, your obedient servant, Patomo.”

“Patomo — if they only charged you five francs to write that letter they didn’t rob you!”

“Yes, yes — five francs!”

“Where is your wench?”

He went out and brought her in.

“Here she is!”

“How do you like her? Does she please you?”
the commandant asked me.

“Oh, I’ve seen better!”

“Come, take her back to her parents, or it’s you who’ll go to jail. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I understand, commandant.”

It was noon. We went upstairs for our bitters.

x

THE HOME OF THE GOD
OF THE BRUSH

[C O N T I N U E D]

¶ O I arrived at Niafunké.

That is a village of sorts, on the Niger, on the road to Timbuctoo.

A big negro was pulling another, bigger still, along by the hand. This was while we were on the road. Every hundred meters the two of them stopped, and the first negro let the other go, raised his arms, and berated him, before the crowd that gathered. The other, his head hanging, submitted, tamely. Then the leader took hold of him again, led him on



THE TOWN CRIER OF NIAFOUNKÉ

a little way, and the business began all over again.

A white man came along, wearing an old helmet, one of those helmets you see in the brush, eloquent of tornados, sand storms, sunstrokes and those fits that lead to madness.

“You must speak the language,” I said to him.
“What’s that fellow saying?”

“He cries out: ‘By order of the commandant.’ Here’s a disgusting fellow, a shameless scoundrel, a great pig of a fellow, who made water at high noon in the public square!”

“Listen,” I said, “just because you wear the dirtiest helmet I’ve seen yet, is that any reason for you to make fun of a stranger?”

“Go to the devil!” he said, and went on.

I called on the commandant, and asked him if this was true.

“Oh, yes, it’s true! They’re very proud, and that sort of thing annoys them.”

I decided that I wouldn’t be bored in Niafunké. I stopped there. It happened to be the day that court was held.

The Residency was conventional. A hundred



blacks, as usual, sat around outside. Just the same, I saw something different. Under the veranda was a bench, and on this bench sat five negroes, obviously superior to the rest. They were chiefs. It seemed that they had got drunk, and so lost authority. The god of the jungle had sentenced them to eight days of punishment. Here were five prefects wearing dunces' caps! Marvelous Africa!

In the brush justice is not dispensed in a palace. Nor are there any judges. Justice should have the traditional oak? There are only silk cotton trees. Justice is the commandant.

A commandant is a man of universal qualities. In case of rebellion he is a marshal. In time of famine he is a commissary. If a flood or the hippopotami overthrow a bridge he is an engineer. He is a road maker as well as a bridge builder. For two years, in France, we have been looking for a Minister of Finance, in all directions — and every commandant is one! He is a lawyer. We have seen that he is a jack of all trades. In the forest he is a woodsman; on the coast, a skilled canoeist. In the desert he becomes a camel! That day, he was a judge.

Very well, let's get to the judging!

They took their places in a room of the Residency, the commandant at a table, the interpreter beside him. Next to the table were two blacks of the first water, two notables, the jurors.

The first plaintiff wasn't decent. His belt hung in ribbons. He might have worn his best and newest suit when he went to court!

"What does he want?" asked the commandant.

The fellow delivered himself of a long speech. Deciding that he had talked long enough the commandant stopped him, and the interpreter then translated.

"He says that, having inherited his father's two wives, one of whom was his mother, he married his mother to one of his friends, who, in exchange, promised him a cow. But now, after two months, his friend has returned his mother to him, saying he would rather have his cow. He demands that his friend take back his mother, and give him a sheep, since he finds his mother isn't worth a cow."

"What do the jurors say?" asked the commandant. They were asleep. The commandant struck the



table a great blow, and they jumped. Made aware of the case, they asked how old the mother was.

“Almost twice my age,” said the son.

The dignitaries replied that then she wasn’t even worth a goat! So the sentry seized the unfortunate son and threw him out into the yard. We went on to the next case. It was one of attempted murder. The wounded man entered, dragging himself along on his back. The assailant followed, helping him to place himself.

“Well, then?”

“Well,” said the interpreter, “it was like this. The people of the village had met to grind their meal. This one’s father owed thirteen-francs-fifty to the big fellow here. The big fellow said: ‘Give me the money your father owes me.’ This other answered: ‘Let me have a little time.’ The big one said: ‘That will cost you dear.’ The other gave him the ‘little eyes.’ Outraged by that grave insult, the big fellow struck him with his cutlass.”

“Why did you do that?”

“Allah! Iake! Iake! It was God’s will!” answered the potential murderer.

“You struck him.”

“No, commandant, it was my hand that struck him.”

“What do the dignitaries say?”

They said that, according to the custom, he must receive a hundred lashes, be put in prison until the other was well, and be killed if the wounded man died.

“How is the wounded man?”

He said he felt as well as a bitch would with a javelin wound in her leg.

“Well — three months in prison, eh?”

The jurors, said the interpreter, thought that because of the “little eyes” it should be four months.

Two blacks and a wench came in.

“What do they want?”

“This one,” said the interpreter, pointing to the smaller of the two men, “is an old soldier. He is back from France. She is his wife; the other is his brother. The soldier, before his departure, entrusted his wife to his brother. Now he complains because his brother hasn’t taken care of his wife.”

“Still, she’s not thin!”



“He says his brother fed her; he has no complaint about that. But the brother has done him a great injury and a great wrong. During these two years he hasn’t slept with his wife! He says he expected to have a child when he came home; that he has not; that, consequently, he is impoverished. He wants an indemnity.”

“You see how it is!” said the commandant.

The two jurors were no longer snoring. They were asked what they thought, as usual. They consulted together.

“They say,” said the interpreter, “that she should be asked if this is true.”

“Rri!” said the wench — meaning, “Yes, it’s true.”

“Very well, then, they say the brother owes him an indemnity.”

“How does the guilty one feel about it?” I asked.

“He says he knows he has injured his brother, and that he ought to be condemned. He’s terribly sorry, but his brother’s wife didn’t appeal to him!”

That cost the fastidious one three goats!

They went on. Now a woman and two men came in; it was a case of adultery. Husband, wife and lover. The husband was old, but he had a magnificent boubou; the wife was a Peuhl, and showed, frankly, the charms of her youthful body. The lover was poor; he had only a string girdle and an iron comb. The husband said:

“My wife slept with him ten times. I want a hundred francs.”

“He wants the iron comb, too,” added the interpreter.

“Ask her if it’s true.”

She said it was.

“Ask her why she did this.”

She hung her head and spoke from between her breasts.

“She says that when there’s no more meal at home one goes somewhere else to look for some.”

“Well said!” said the commandant.

“And what has the lover to say?”

“Oh, that he liked it very much!”



The two jurors took a long look at the Peuhl.

“What do they think is right, according to the tribal custom?”

“They think that, as the woman is pretty, a hundred francs isn’t much.”

“And the comb?”

“That he must give up the comb, too.”

The lover didn’t have a cent!

“I know that,” said the husband. “Then let him cultivate my field for a month.”

“You agree?” said the commandant.

The lover said he did. And the three of them went off, the best of friends. The next affair, too, was one of a triangle. But this time the husband sought only thirty francs.

“Come — make it twenty!” said the commandant.

“You understand,” said the husband, “my wife is my property. If I lend an animal, and they tire it out, they pay me. My wife is like my beast. Do you understand, commandant?”

“Well, then, twenty-five francs!”

“No — thirty francs!”

The lover interrupted.

“Fifteen francs!” he shouted.

“Does the woman confess?”

She did.

“Sixteen francs,” said the lover, as if conscience stricken. The husband held out for thirty francs. They were getting nowhere. Finally: “I said twenty francs,” cried the commandant. “If the two men can’t agree I’ll send the woman and her lover to jail.”

“Ah, no, my commandant,” said the husband, “not my wife. I’ll take twenty francs.”

So the matter was arranged.

Cows, donkeys, women — it’s much the same! But, when it comes to women, the matter is less serious: an understanding is reached more easily than when cows are in question.

XI
TIMBUCTOO

So my pilgrimage was near its end. I was about to find a name in this immensity. I had crossed the Soudan on the backs of blacks. The country of the unhappiest of peoples had told us a little of what it was. The Senegalese soldiers rowed us up the Niger. They gave of their best, encouraging themselves with their plaintive songs, that the white man, that visible god, might be satisfied.

It no longer seemed to us that we did more than penetrate the shadows. The darkness had spoken to

us, the brush had declared itself. Timbuctoo was about to appear.

These people who had nothing — nothing — well, then, what had they? Did they own a town with a name, then? Poor as it was, it was a gift to our starved imaginations. We didn't disdain that. We went in search of it. Next day we were to plunge into its misery. We were to see it again naked, defenseless, that people with the eyes of cattle. We were to see Timbuctoo.

Balfoulabé, Toukoto, Kita, Bamako, Segou, Macina, Dioura, Diré, Niafounké, the stations of our route, what were they? Only black Africa in its helpless power, a few spots under a raging sun, names without significance, having a meaning only for the dwellers in the brush or the map makers.

Kabara was already in sight. It is the village at the end of the canal that the Niger feeds. Thence we were to cross the last stretch of brush before we reached the desert, that brush which had the right, no doubt, in contrast with what was to follow, to be called a forest. Seven kilometers beyond . . .

Poor negro country! The whites, your adopted



sons, don't mean to leave you the prestige even of a legend. They will strip you of your last rag. They aren't willing for Timbuctoo to be of any account. When they hear that one is going there, they laugh in one's face. A pilgrim on his way to Timbuctoo loses caste with them. They think he must be a poet, which is something to be ashamed of in our times.

We had to veil our faces; our barge was touching at Kabara.

A barge is a good sort of creature, especially when one must leave it for a horse. The horse was there, waiting for me. I hoped it had heard of Locarno, and was disposed to be peaceful. In any case, so that it might make no mistake, I took care, as I approached it, to look like a horseman. It was an Arab, by the market. I was in no hurry. Couldn't they hobble it? No. It seemed not. The beast looked as if it were in possession of all its faculties, too. Were there no donkeys in Kabara? Oh, well — at least, it wasn't excited. It seemed to me lucky that horses drink nothing but water!

There was no road to Timbuctoo. One rode through the trees like a sylvan deity. A strange sort



of god, though, wearing black sun-glasses, and, on one's head, a pyramid of net. The branches of the trees stabbed one; they sprouted toothpicks. In that country that offered no food, the trees provided toothpicks! The Niger was in flood; its waters wandered through the woods. Kindly waters! It seems that they do their best, once a year, to give the desert a drink. A regular river barred the way; we had to get off our horses. So much clear gain!

My beast was unsaddled. A negro carried the saddle. I crossed to the other side on a fallen tree trunk. Ten meters of water were now between me and my horse; I was satisfied. But some one made a sign, and the too intelligent beast swam over! I offered him a white pebble, looking like a lump of sugar, in the hope of alienating his affections permanently. He wasn't annoyed. Only, he was very wet.

Three kilometers further. But would my skin, on which I sat, hold out to the end? I saw a stone pyramid. What was it doing there? I felt so far from the world that everything that reminded me of it moved me. Lieutenant Boiteux fell here, in this spot.



That was the last shady spot. I already saw the sands.

And there was the tree of the rags. A Moslem, returning from Mecca, stopped at that spot, and died there. The tree became a fetich. All who passed tore off a scrap of their *boubous* and nailed it to a branch. In return they would have a new *boubou* within a year, and good luck on the rest of their journey. I left a piece of my handkerchief. After all — how does one know?

All at once there were no more trees. Before us was a great sea of sand. The Sahel! The border of the Sahara! I lifted myself in my saddle. But no — not yet.

The horse sank to its fetlocks. Its hoofs no longer made any noise. The silence, which already had been universal, seemed now to proclaim its presence.

About us everything was white. The desert was wavy. A little wind made tiny ridges in the sand. A camel appeared on the horizon. Land — land! Timbuctoo!

Two square piles first, two houses with terraces



stretching before them. One would not have thought they stood so high. But that was only a mirage; they were, in fact, only of one story. My vision increased, and, like some gigantic mole hill, the town emerged in the midst of its fortifications — the sand. Only space surrounded it, immensity. I saw a collection of badly built mud huts. But if there were only one star in the sky it would seem all the more beautiful, and the whole world would know its name!

Timbuctoo!

Another pyramid:

To Colonel Bonnier
Who Entered Timbuctoo
January 10, 1894.

Killed

At Tacoubao

With 10 officers, 2 non-commissioned
officers and 80 soldiers
January 15, 1894.

In the desert, above all, the gods are thirsty!

MUCH has been said of the terraces of Timbuctoo — and with reason. But don't let your spirits rise!



These terraces have no flowers, no fountains. They are the ceilings of roofless houses. They are made of mud, not of marble. One can hardly say they have been built, since they crumble away so soon. And when you see no one below, it is because the inhabitants have died.

Timbuctoo — a blazing labyrinth!

Aside from the section where we have reared our six or seven structures, structures that seem to delimit a vast pool in which only sand baths can be taken, the town is made up of streets badly welded together, more often knock-kneed than erect, where highwaymen, if there were any, could lie in wait for you every hundred yards in an ideal ambuscade.

You see houses, squarely built of earth, pierced with a low door, with windows adorned nobly with wooden statues.

Timbuctoo is a market town, too. It is a city that has no nationality. There it is no longer only the whites who have left their half-breed children behind, but Arabs, Touaregs, real blacks. It's a melting pot. After months in the desert or the long ascent of the Niger, it was the city of pleasure, long awaited by

the men of the caravans. Timbuctoo is still the same.

There is the mosque, its dome is carved out of a wooden scaffolding. They are repairing it; it is falling to pieces, like everything built of mud, like the town.

The other day Commandant Fevez sent for the Cadi.

“Listen,” he said, “I am not a Moslem, and I’ve nothing to do with your affairs, but your mosque is falling down. Mahomed won’t know what to tell Allah. Don’t you think it ought to be shored up?”

The Cadi did think so, yes.

So now all Timbuctoo is at work on the mosque. Tom-toms, beating perpetually, excite the workmen. The women, atoning for their sins, bring water; the men carry balls of clay; the dotards, leaning on their sticks, encourage the others with their arms and their voices. It will be magnificent. The more sinners a city has among its women, the richer will its temples be.

WHAT have the whites against this famous city? Every one goes there in search of mystery, and seems



never to find it. But one doesn't see mystery, my friends; one feels it. It expresses itself voicelessly, like a deaf-mute. There are plenty of deserted alleys. Haven't you been present, then, at the Azalai which is in May?

The caravans come from the mines of Taoudeni; they bring to Timbuctoo the salt that is to season the Soudan, the Haute-Volta, Senegambia, the Ivory Coast, the Gold Coast, the interior and the whole coast! One may see coming from the Sahel two thousand, three thousand, camels. It takes them two or three days to arrive. The desert comes in on stilts.

The women of Timbuctoo, the Fachis, have donned their handsomest *boubous* again. Their linen is well starched. Their coiffure has been freshened that very morning; three balls of hair, adorned with multi-colored ribbons, trail proudly behind them. Their gold is in their ears; their silver, which they have turned into bracelets, is on their wrists and their ankles. Those who boast umbrellas are the best dressed! They swarm from there through the low doors, fill up the alleys, rush to the desert, singing, to receive the Azalai.

ON THE VOLTA ROUGE





“Haré! Haré!” they say. (Let us sing — let us sing.) “The caravan men are the great men! We will bring them water to wash themselves. And if the one who picks me out is the handsomest — oh, I know what I’ll give him!”

They go, fanning themselves with their palm leaf fans.

“Haré! Haré! The man from the West is a fine man! If he is veiled, it is so that his lips won’t taste of sand!”

They are all there, all the *sonraïs*, all the — young ones!

“Haré! Haré! The miner has many gifts — I’m only sixteen, and I have no child on my back!”

On the night of the Azalai the *Kanambous*, the husbands, don’t sleep in the homes of their wives.

“Haré! Haré!”

BUT in the morning their wives have gifts of grain and tobacco for them!

The festival over, the Azalai go back to the



desert, and you hear the *sonraïs* singing again:

“Haré! Haré! The Man of the West goes back to the caravan route, but he no longer has all the money! Haré! Haré!”

YACOUBA THE DECIVILIZED

HERE is an extract from a report of M. Clozel, former Governor of the Soudan:

“M. Dupuis has lived in Timbuctoo since 1895. Thanks to his learning, his extraordinary knowledge of the people and of the affairs of the country, he has attained an absolutely unique position in that region. There is not a permanent resident, from the extreme North to the mouth of the Niger, who does not venerate the name of Yacouba, by which he is popularly known even in the depths of the desert, beyond Oualata and Taoudeni. . . .



“All found him, in times of crisis, a dependable aide, whose sure counsel averted political mistakes which might have had the gravest results. . . .

“No column, no reconnoitering party, left Timbuctoo, that did not see M. Dupuis beside its commander.

“It is largely owing to him that we visited Taoudeni without firing a shot, and that, a few months ago, we reached the gates of Oualata in peace.

“Finally, the success of Laverdure’s column, in the Gourma, was, in part, his doing, and in that expedition M. Dupuis showed, under fire, the greatest energy and the serenest courage.

“Such brilliant services should not go unrewarded. That would be a crying injustice. He is as much at home in Arabic, Songhà, the Tamachek dialect, Bambara and Peuhl as in French. That is why I have the honor, M. the Governor-General, to suggest to you his appointment to the Division of Native Affairs, with the grade of Associate Principal of the Third Class.

“You know as well as I that this exceptional man came to Africa as a Catholic missionary, and



that he gave up all his professional ties to devote himself solely to the service of France in the Soudan. . . .”

I STARTED out from the Place Joffre, that great sand bath of Timbuctoo; at once I found myself in the maze. I was to follow the alleys leading north. And I knew very well that, in order to find my way, I had first to get lost. For the first time since I had started from Dakar I tasted the pleasures of a walk.

When you walk there, Timbuctoo accompanies you, talking endlessly from the summit of its petty ruins. It is the most eloquent silence in all Africa.

I was going to Yacouba’s house. There was no need to lift my head; everything was on the level of my eyes. So, in a street in which I was lost, I saw a sign hanging below a door. Could one find rooms to let, then, in Timbuctoo, I wondered? I read: “René Caillié lived here in 1828.”

So — that was the house! The first white man who reached Timbuctoo — and returned! That pretended Arab who disguised himself for five years, and whom smallpox, no doubt to help his masquerade, dis-



figured! René Caillié! Exactly a hundred years ago!
Poor devil! Glory comes high.

“Yacouba?” I said, to a negro child. He took my hand and led me to a house. I stooped, and went down two steps. The little hall in which I found myself was so dark that I could see nothing. Having removed my sun-glasses, I saw what looked like a human form, and then two more. Three women were seated on the ground. One was black; the two others were half-breeds.

“M. Yacouba?” I asked.

He was out. I went out, and leaned against the common bakehouse of the quarter. I waited, in the silent alley. A man came from the east, a queer one for a European. He had a long white beard, and wore a helmet, a *boubou*, and trousers like those of a Greek soldier. In one hand was a cane, in the other a pipe and a pouch full of tobacco of the leaves of some tree I can’t remember. His bare feet were covered with slippers of skin. He was smiling.

“You are M. Yacouba?”

“Yes, Yacouba.”

We went in to his house.

“This is my wife,” he said, when we were in the dark hall. “She is called Salama.”

“Good day, madame!” She was the negress I had seen before.

“My two daughters!” (The half-breeds.)

“Come up to my own room. I keep a European corner for myself.”

We crossed two courts. In the second a young negress, her body bent, was grinding meal.

“One of my wife’s prisoners. She is one of the family, you see.”

An earthen stairway led us to a long room, furnished with a table, chairs, a sofa. In a corner bottles awaited the hour appointed for their sacrifice. A second “prisoner,” handsome and nude, crossed the room.

“I have adapted myself,” said Yacouba, with a smile. “Here, it’s quite the thing. No one thinks evil. Life here is not as captious as in France. Let’s have an *apéritif*. Take some tobacco from my pouch — you’ll find none more fragrant.”

“The Senegalese who rowed me up the Niger begged me to give you their regards, M. Yacouba.



In all this vast country, I have heard of you everywhere."

I saw at once that his fame meant little to him.

"I like the blacks," he said. "I love Timbuctoo, where Dupuis died and Yacouba was born. In 1902, when I was a White Father, the natives had already given me the freedom of the city. My diploma read: 'He shares all our rights, as he shares all our obligations. He shall always keep his religion, as we keep ours.'

"I worked with them on the roads. Later, the notables accepted me as one of themselves, taking me into a secret order. The other black members of my quarter are all dead. I remain the sole representative of the negroes. They know I will not betray them. I am one of them, I have forsown the white race. Do you want to know what my life has been?"

He seemed unwilling to revive his memories.

"My life? It's what you see."

"Still, you were born, I suppose, sometime?"

"Yes, I was born in the Rue des Billettes, in Paris, which is now the Rue des Archives, opposite the Protestant church. My father was a wine dealer.



Wait — drink, it's necessary in this country! Your good health!

“I was sent to live with my grandparents, peasants, near Château-Thierry. When I was eleven, I don't know how, I went to the seminary at Soissons. I felt no vocation, but my mother was pleased. Later, I was vicar at Marbe, curé at Morgny, in Thierache. In 1891, I went with the White Fathers, whom I respect deeply. I studied in Algiers for two years.

“Then the hour struck for me. I was with the first caravan of missionaries sent to the Soudan. Those days were not like these. How long did it take you to come from Dakar?”

“Nineteen days — taking it easily.”

“And, making all haste, I needed eighty-seven! I established the mission in Timbuctoo in May, 1895. That seems to have been thirty-three years ago — thirty-three years, the age of our Lord. From 1897 to 1904 I was Father Superior of the mission.”

“Yacouba? How did you get that name?”

“How? Well, obviously, Yacouba is not the translation of Dupuis, nor of Auguste-Victor, my first names. Yacouba is Jacob, in Hebrew and



Arabic. A few days after our arrival in Timbuctoo the head men, led by the Cadi Daounaki, came to visit us.

“‘What is your name?’ they asked my chief, Father Hacquart.

“‘Abdallah!’

“‘And that of your comrade?’

“‘Yacouba!’

“‘Father,’ I said to him, later, ‘you might have chosen a less Yiddish name for me!’

“He had been taken by surprise. I remained Yacouba.”

“You marched in column with the army?”

“Ah, yes, in 1900, with Lieutenant Pichon, to Araouan. Then to Taoudeni, then in the Gourma, then . . . Oh, I knew all those officers!

“Do you know how Gouraud got his first twenty days under arrest? A band of Touaregs was worrying us in the brush near Kabara. He went after them. And he was wounded, quite badly — while I had no iodine nor any dressings with which to attend to his injury. Just the same, he cleared the country of the Touaregs, and freed the road all the way to



the Niger. A few days later a dispatch came from Paris. I got ready to open my last bottle of wine to celebrate his third stripe. But it was twenty days under arrest that they gave him! They didn't spoil us in those days, I can tell you!"

"And how is that you are no longer a White Father?"

He looked at me with eyes that were full of an old grief.

"Excuse me — I'm not embarrassed, but I find it hard to choose just the right words, in French — they come to me in Sonraï. You don't speak Sonraï? No? Well. In Timbuctoo I was no longer happy. Finding myself unable any longer to resist my nature, I resigned from the company of the White Fathers that grave scandals might be averted."

"Then?"

"I went to the commandant and said: 'I have doffed my cassock.'

"What do you mean to do?" he asked me.

"I shall go to Koriomme with the fishermen."

"Impossible!"

"Appoint me harbor master, at sixty francs a



month — it's all I need. I shall work for France.'

"I asked too much, it seemed. I went down to Koriomme. There I lived like a negro with my friends the blacks. There I married Salama. My wife had lived only with Europeans; I took over the children of my white predecessors, the prisoners, the whole establishment. I have had seven children of my own — two are dead. In all I have thirteen, including a child of my eldest daughter. She lived with a white man, who has gone away, as all the white men do. We've never seen him again. Victor! You shall see for yourself."

A little fellow, nearly white, had just come in; he was naked, like a black.

"Where does this gentleman come from?" asked Yacouba.

"From the Rue des Billettes!"

Paris? France? This grandson of a Frenchman did not know those names! The white country, for him, was the Rue des Billettes! Yacouba took up his tale again.

"Governor Clozel passed through Koriomme. 'A negro fisherman?' he said. 'Is that all they knew of



how to use you!' For he was much annoyed. Not without great difficulty, he made room for me in the government service. So I came back to Timbuctoo. I hired a cook. Salama no longer ground meal. My *boubous* were embroidered, my trousers were lengthened, my cadi's stick was cut, they made me replace my turban by a helmet. Salama said: 'Poor Yacouba! Now I am a lady and you are a lord.' Maybe I look like one, but that's all — my spirit is black."

"Some one told me that you decided once to go to France, but that at Bamako, when you saw the railway, it disgusted you so much that you came back to Timbuctoo?"

"They told you the truth. But I did go back to France. I wanted to see my mother again, and show her my children. But I found myself completely denationalized. I no longer was in any sympathy with the white land. I tell you, I am a negro to the depths of my being. Happily, I am decivilized. In the country, in Thierache, I got along well enough still — but in the towns!

"Life there is like that in a madhouse. You don't see it, but you live a life endurable only to the



insane. The way people are always tearing about, only to come back to the same spot at home! Oh, no — in Africa one feels that one is alive. The people are good; you need not be always on your guard against scoundrels. Nothing is sunk in prejudices. While you, at home —!

“‘Your children are black,’ my brother remarked, when I was in France on that journey. Here every one understands that I could hardly hope to have children more nearly white. You want to know if my children wanted to stay in France? Never! After a month we all said: ‘Where is our old Timbuctoo?’

“I am an unfrocked priest, monsieur. That put me beyond the pale, in France. My poor children can be proud of me, in Africa. Paul said to me the other day, when we came back from the opening of the dam: ‘Papa, why do you stay behind the others as you do?’ He thinks his father is somebody, you see. Alas! Some white man may make them ashamed of me, later on. That is a thought that often keeps me from enjoying too fully having them around me.”

“Just the same, I would call you a happy man.”



“Condemned to exile, I have learned how to love my horizon, and to grow attached to my surroundings.”

“And your former comrades, the White Fathers?”

“One of them came to Timbuctoo the other day. He said Mass. I asked his permission to help him. He was delighted. He prayed for me. As for the others, I write to them sometimes, like a ghost haunting his former home.”

“Do they answer?”

Yaucouba rose. He moved some bottles of *apéritif*, opened a door, and brought out an iron strong box. From it he took a letter, thus protected. the ants hadn't been able to eat.

“Read this,” he said.

Apostolic Vicarage of the Soudan.

January 12, 1928.

My Dear Colleague:

I address you thus, since, in spite of everything, and regardless of all the vicissitudes of life, I have always thought of you and loved you as such, and I know that my other colleagues in the Soudan all share my feelings concerning you. If ever, when I



come back to the Soudan, I go to Timbuctoo, you will let me pay you a visit, will you not? Do not worry; I shall not importune you nor try to interfere in what concerns you alone, and we shall part better friends than when we meet.

Do you ask my blessing? I give it to you in full, overflowing measure, immensely fraternal, and I embrace you as never brother embraced brother before. Your old and most affectionate brother in Jesus and Mary.

FERNAND SUAVANT,
Apostolic Vicar of the Soudan.

When I had finished reading the letter, old Yacouba was crying. I have no doubt that he knew it by heart.

XIII

A NIGHT
ON THE NIGER

BY Mercury! By the wings flying from his helmet and his ankles, if I had a bitch I would see to it that she bore three puppies, each with the worst possible disposition. One for Mme. Edouard Herriot, another for Mme. Paul Morand, the third for Paul Morand.

I found those delightful travelers at Niafounké. I had even had the pleasure, earlier, of meeting them at Bamako. Together we crossed part of the Sahel, gun in hand, ready to kill lions, panthers, hyenas,



ostriches, anything you can think of with fur or feathers. Although, to be sure, the nearest we came to killing (and we only half did that) any one was in the case of M. Peyron, a most sympathetic and charming resident of Macina. Oh, well, he's still alive, and I trust that many years remain to him in which to curse us!

At Niafounké we took to the Niger. Two barges were ready for us. And here — give me your best attention, please — the play begins. In one barge the food, the drinkables, and the utensils white people ordinarily use for eating and drinking, were placed.

Everything went well. Mme. Herriot, in spite of our advice, insisted on bathing in the Niger, so the rest of us had to be careful to keep the crocodiles away. In the afternoons we played poker, and then, of course, we mutually watched one another, instead of the crocodiles. Henri Bernaud, as a souvenir of a common and lively past, had made me a parting gift of a phonograph, so, after dark, we listened to that. All was serene, even though we didn't kiss before we went to bed.



The barges stayed at Kabara. The Herriot-Morand caravan went on up to Timbuctoo. Then it went down to Kabara again, while I stayed behind. They took their barge; mine waited for me. "*Au revoir!* Have a good trip home! Give my regards to Paris!" I called, to those most perfect companions of a week, until they disappeared behind the toothpick trees.

Timbuctoo interested me and kept me busy. From the Cadi to the cemetery, from the nomads to the residents, from the desert to the alleys, from dawn to moonlight, that was true for many days. But at last, one afternoon, my little horse turned up again. He was still enough of an Arab and restive enough, too. It was time for me to start.

I reached Kabara. The barge was there. A sergeant begged me to take him aboard. He was on his way home to France. Wherever I might be going, he would save time by traveling with me.

"All right. Come aboard, sergeant!" I said. "Good-by, Commandant Fevez, my good host! Good-by, Monsieur Guy. To your places, Senegalese!"



Our destination was at Mohti, four days down the Niger. Thence we would fly, like antelopes, to Ouagadougou.

The barge glided along. Night was coming. I might better have been on the boulevards, watching the Parisiennes go by. To be sure, when I was there, I didn't know my luck. I decided to console myself with food and wine.

Where were the boxes? Where was my beef tongue with tomato sauce? Where was my tunny fish in pickle? Where was my Bologna sausage, which I liked to spread on my bread, like some jolly pink vaseline? And where, oh, where, was the precious wine, the darling of the brush dwellers, in which one may either dip one's pen to write or one's lips to drink? And my headcheese? And my canned rabbit stew? Everything was gone! Here was black magic indeed!

It was incomprehensible. Mme. Herriot drank only tea. Mme. Paul Morand drank only tea. Morand drank as did those ladies. What the devil had become of my larder? To say nothing of the spoons, the forks, and the plates? Certainly they weren't in the



habit of eating either iron or china! And the glasses! They hadn't seemed to have such stomachs!

I didn't have even a fishing rod, so that I might seek food in the Niger!

They did leave me a knife, the most sharply pointed one of all — no doubt that I might end it all in my despair!

Worthy ladies, illustrious friend, I haven't begun to get even with you yet!

The Senegalese, on deck, were busy stuffing themselves with their *couscous*. A negro eats like ten white men. In the time it takes us to eat three shrimps, a negro loads kilos of meal into his belly. That night, just to aggravate me, they ate more than usual! They were swallowing one ball before the last was down. They went at their food with both hands.

“Let me taste your food,” I said to the chief. He gave me a fine ball, very round, very dirty. I tried it. “It's good,” he said. “Good *couscous*.” I couldn't manage it. It tasted like sand dressed with perspiration. “Give me a franc — to-morrow you shall have a chicken.” To-morrow!

I hunted for my own stores again. Nothing



under the bed, nothing anywhere. There were only the walls, against which I could beat my head, if I pleased. If my ungrateful companions had been there, I would have eaten them. To be sure, I had my boy, but if his body was as hard as his head, what would become of my teeth? We floated down the Niger, accompanied by trumpet-birds.

“Haven’t you a gun?” the chief asked me. And he pointed out the ducks that were flying, in thousands, from one bank to the other. A sight that embittered me the more: so many ducks in flight, and not one to eat with green peas!

“Do you know the Dardanelles?” he asked.

“Yes, I know the Dardanelles.”

“And Saint-Raphael?”

“Yes, I know Saint-Raphael.”

“You know Montauban?”

“Yes, I know Montauban.”

“You know everything! Do you know my father and mother, too?”

He was a veteran soldier.

“How did you like France?” I asked him.

“Good — or not?”



“Oh, very good, France! Many fine shops, many lights, many white ladies.”

He roared with laughter.

“They called me ‘My Mamadou,’ they gave me plenty of gifts!”

“Have you any love letters?”

They’re not so rare in Africa, Senegalese soldiers who had had gay adventures in France! Plenty of perfumed letters went to Africa, after the war! And not letters from the slums, either; letters that had a style of their own! “To my Mamadou! To my Samba! To my dear black boy!” Ah, curious ladies!

“Yes, I have love letters. Come to Koulikoro, and I’ll show you.”

Certainly I wanted to go to Koulikoro! I was hungry. Suddenly I had an idea. Either I was dreaming, which was likely enough with a stomach so empty, or I had taken a sergeant aboard at Kabara. But now there was no sergeant on the barge. Had they eaten him, too, by wireless? The two boats were brought together. My man was asleep on the woodpile, near the stove, as if he had been very cold, and we were on the way to hunt wolves.



“Look here,” I said, shaking him, “I have nothing to eat!”

He woke up, reluctantly.

“Excuse me,” he said. “I’m not hungry. I’ve drunk too much.”

“Have you, indeed!”

“You see,” he said, “I’m from Araouan.”

He had provisions. Officials are in the habit of traveling slowly. In Africa transportation, officially, is as it was thirty years ago, with this difference, that now tug boats are used. To please those who travel of their own free will, the government can only lend the machines to private business. The tourist, traveling *de luxe*, well cared for by the governor, talks, when he returns to France, about the rapidity of transportation in that savage land. The more exalted he is the more he talks about it. But, all that aside, it’s soon to be seen that nothing is really stirring. An assistant commissioner reached Timbuctoo on February 21; he had traveled fast, having left France on January 7! If I hadn’t taken the sergeant aboard, he would have had to wait at Kabara for another opportunity to go down river. It takes nearly



a month for officials to cover a distance that, in these times, one could travel in a hundred hours. How much time could be saved if we had steamers! But where have I got the idea that one ought to be able to travel full steam ahead all over Africa?

“ARAOUAN!” repeated the sergeant, now seated opposite me. “Araouan . . . !”

I ate his tinned tunny fish, his rabbit stew. I drank his black wine.

“As for me,” he said, “I drank nineteen *apéritifs* this afternoon. I’m not thirsty any more.”

“You’re a distillery, not a sergeant!”

“But you don’t understand — I come from Araouan!”

I remembered having seen that name, very often, on tombstones in the cemetery at Timbuctoo.

“And — well, the wireless operators at Kabara make a holiday when one of us comes back from Araouan. They know all about it, even those who’ve never been there.”

“Where is this Araouan of yours?”



“How do I know? Six days beyond Timbuctoo, in the Sahara!”

“And what do you do there?”

“You die there, by God!”

“What else?”

“Oh, one has fever, too. And, besides that, I worked the wireless. But go ahead — eat and drink, I have more than I need.”

He poured me a glass of wine.

“Your health, Paul Morand!”

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Nothing.”

He slouched and slapped his knees.

“Araouan!” he repeated. “Araouan!”

“Were there many of you there?”

“Oh, there were ten of us.”

“Is there a village?”

“When the camels pass! They hunt ostriches there. If only there were water in the wells! Ho! I’m going to sleep.”

They brought the two barges together again. It was night. Annoyed by the operation, the Niger spat like a cat at bay before a dog.



“Bon jour,” said the chief Senegalese.

“Ah, you old Bambara!” said the sergeant, striking his chest. “All right with you, eh? How’s your father?”

“He’s fine!”

“And your mother?”

“Yes, she’s all right.”

“And your cow?”

“I’ll return all this at Mopti!” I called to him. He shrugged his shoulders, repeating:

“That damned Araouan! No water in the wells, even!”

THE NEGRO IS NOT A TURK

GOOD-BY, Mopti! Good-by, Diené, lovely daughter of the Soudan! Diené, where one is dazzled by the squares, the streets, the one-story houses and the Mosque they are going to reproduce for the Colonial Exposition. At least, I suppose they will. What could they show us at Vincennes more characteristic of Africa than the Mosque of Diené? A new greeting to the endless simplicity of the black land! Good-by, San!

Did I abandon my barge and find some food?



I'll tell you I did! I attended to all that at Mopti. I even sat on my boxes so that they shouldn't be stolen again. And I hurried on, I hurried as if the maneless lions of that region had been after me. But I encountered only partridges and guinea hens. Now that I no longer lacked anything, game was all around me!

Oh, the fine roads! You couldn't ask any better. I'm not joking. The roads were superb. Ask the natives, if you don't believe me. And they were all the more remarkable in view of the fact that they hadn't cost us anything.

Only negroes were spent to make them. Are we so poor, then, in black Africa?

Not at all. The budget of the general government shows a surplus of I don't know how many hundred million francs. A surplus? That's a scandalous word in a new country. Those hundreds of millions ought to be put to work to increase the wealth of the country, not tucked away in the national stocking. That is an appalling idea, isn't it? But how is that surplus accumulated? From the receipts of the colonies that make up the central government.



Now, we must be more precise; that is indispensable. There are Frenchmen who believe the colonies cost the home government money. Not a bit of it. Our colonies are richer than France. You'll say, perhaps, that that's not saying much. Well, go to the Rue de Rivoli and ask whoever is in charge of the Ministry of Finance to show you his surplus!

Our colonies live.

They supply a living to thousands of soldiers and French officials.

Some even yield France an income.

That being understood, let's go on.

We are dealing, just now, with French West Africa. There are eight colonies. Each has its budget. Whence comes the money? From the tax each negro must pay and the customs duties every one pays. For example, Dahomey, the smallest of all, reports, this year, receipts of sixty-two million francs. Of these, it is allowed twenty millions for its own needs. Dakar — that is the central government — takes forty-two millions. It's the same in the other seven colonies.

The colonies are not satisfied. They are right.



They say they know their own needs best. Dahomey asserts that with the money it remits to Dakar the Dahomeans might have fine docks, many miles of railway, and permanent public works. The Soudan, the Haute-Volta, Senegambia, the Ivory Coast, the Niger, Guinea, say the same thing. As for Mauretania, she has nothing to say; she runs away.

So, Dakar takes the money.

Dakar explains its greed on grounds of high principle. Each colony, says Dakar, is integrated with the rest. With Dahomey's money, says Dakar, I will undertake works in the Haute-Volta. That will benefit Dahomey. It's all very logical. But of principles it's as true as of rabbit pelts; their test is whether they work out in practice.

Up to now, they haven't worked.

The most urgent task in this country is to manufacture negroes.

To use the official phrase, black Africa is not a colony for settlement. White men live there only temporarily, to administer it, and in a definite circle of their own. If I were governor-general I would stretch a great sheet over the whole accursed coast, on which



I would have these words painted: "*The white man who takes any unnecessary exertion will be punished at once by nature.*"

So the natives are indispensable to us.

If we have no regard for the future, at least for our own sakes, we ought to watch over them as carefully as over a field of wheat. Instead, we mow them down before they have fairly sprouted.

The first task of a leader of men is to see that they don't die. Otherwise he becomes only the watchman of a cemetery.

Three hundred millions in the surplus, but:

Not one motor truck.

Not a single steam roller.

Not a hand cart.

Only negroes and negresses, a stone on their heads, a harlequin's bat in their hands!

In the Soudan, in the Haute-Volta, on the Ivory Coast, in all the Pleiades, there are more than twenty thousand kilometers of roads. All the materials of which they have been built have been carried on the heads of blacks.

What is the negro? He is not a Turk, as he has



been called. He is not strong. A black color is not an evidence of strength. Sometimes, in the concentration camps, those who are working to pay in kind die as if there were a plague. In this connection I will give you a superb phrase, drawn from an official report: "The incredible fragility of the natives...." You ought to see them when it rains. They walk bent over, as if stricken by the violent pains of colic, with little mincing steps, their arms crossed over their chests. And at night? It's not hot all the time; they cough so that you would think you were in a hospital. Those who possess a rag to cover them spread it carefully over their backs. But that doesn't keep them from clustering, with their poorer companions, around a fire of three sticks of wood, which some of them blow upon, to keep it alive, with their last breaths.

They are treated like cattle. Every administrator will tell you that portage is the scourge of Africa. It exhausts the children, weakens the adolescent blacks, saps the strength of the adults. It brutalizes men and women. The white man advances a theory. He says: "We force them to build roads; it's for their own good. Portage kills them; once



the roads are finished they'll have no more of it."

Nonsense! They'll carry burdens till the end.

Where we should strive to increase the population, we depopulate. Are we to be wood cutters in a human forest? What have these methods brought about? A dire situation. Listen to what has happened in three years.

I. Six hundred thousand natives have gone to the Gold Coast, an English colony.

II. Two million natives have gone to British Nigeria.

III. Ten thousand natives live outside their villages, in a wild state (that is, a wilder state) in the forests of the Ivory Coast.

They fled:

I. From army recruiting.

II. From recruiting for the roads or the railways.

III. From the individual recruiting of the wood cutters.

It's an exodus!

So we come to the Haute-Volta, the Mossi country. It is known in Africa as the reservoir of men.



There are three million negroes there. The whole world comes in search of men, as if to a well for water. For the Thies-Kayes and Kayes-Niger railways, they tap the Mossi. The Ivory Coast, for its railway, taps the Mossi. The lumbermen come up from the lagoons and get men from the Mossi.

And it is considered surprising that the Soudan and the Haute-Volta no longer produce cotton!

Motor trucks and steam rollers!

Here are a thousand negroes in Indian file, heads greased, who are on their way to the machine, to the Ivory Coast railway at Tafire. Seven hundred kilometers. The living? You will find them on the road, God willing! The strong ones take a month to reach the stoneyards. How tame their walk is! Some men drop by the way; the gaps are quickly filled; the file is restored.

They could be carried in trucks; twenty days would be saved, perhaps twenty lives. But — buy trucks? Use tires? Burn gasoline? The surplus would shrink. The negro is fat enough already!

IN THE COUNTRY OF THE POUSSI-POUSSI



UAGADOUGOU!

Wait! I would rather not talk to you about this town. The bold builders to whom we owe it supposed that one day there would be 100,000 people in Ouagadougou. Perhaps 200,000. You think the Frenchman's vision is limited? In France, yes; certainly. In Africa he magnifies everything.

This is not a town, it's a maneuver ground. One can easily see it sustaining a cavalry charge. The horses, however, even though they were helmeted too,

would never reach the end of the road; they would collapse halfway, their flanks heaving.

That's where you should walk around. But, of course, when I talk of walking around in Ouagadougou I'm making fun of you. They told me that three Europeans lived there. Where were they?

Wider, longer, than the Champs-Elysées, an avenue was cut through the blazing brush. On each side twin, gloomy structures stretched out. They were palaces — palaces of mud. Up to this point the scene was so delightful that it was all I could do not to cry for help!

Here, in a corner, lived the last black king, the Morho Naba, Emperor of the Mossis.

In 1920 we created an independent colony out of the Mossi country. We cut Upper Senegambia and Nigeria in two. So the Soudan and the Haute-Volta were born.

It was not a desire for euphony that led us to make Ouagadougou the capital, but the presence there of the Morho Naba. Ouagadougou is a town that might as well be in the moon. It is on a road that leads nowhere. The real capital was predetermined;



it even had as good a name as the other: Bobo-Dioulasso. But we preferred to be pig-headed.

Let's sniff about a little here. We'll have time; we'll be here a day and a night. Oh, nights of Ouagadougou! I lodged in a palace, like every one else; in one of those brand new mud palaces. I took care not to send a photograph of my house to my friends; they would have thought I had made my fortune in cotton or karite butter. This wasn't a wayside inn, a caravanserai, badly kept and polluted, but the home of the secretary-general, no less! An ignorant traveler might have taken me for the second personage of the kingdom — perhaps for the Grand Eunuch!

I went in to go to bed. At once I understand how a grain of wheat must feel when it is put in the oven. Mud drinks heat as a sponge drinks water. My walls had been drinking all day long. Saturated, they let the heat spill over inside my room. "Bah!" I said to myself, "it's hot in Paris, too." And I went to bed. But at once there was a great stirring between the mud of the ceiling and the mud of the floor; the great tournament of bats was beginning. I threw

my pillow at them, my bolster, my shoes. I broke their wings! If you need a bat hunter, tell me what you will pay; you won't find a better trained specialist!

It was enough to wake me up. So I sat down in a colonial chair and read the latest wireless dispatches. Pieces of the ceiling fell on my head. It's not much use having a hard head; you never know whether your skull is thick enough, as the English in Egypt said to the Italian consul, once, when one of their police had attacked an Italian! So I put on my helmet. In the tropics I protected myself against the midnight sun!

What now? What was moving? My trousers! They crept across the floor; the ants were about to reduce them to rags, no doubt to bandage my wounds. I took up battle against the ants. Do you need an ant hunter . . . ? Finally I ended by growing used to the bats, the ants, the bombardment from the ceiling. My spirits were plucking up when, suddenly, a scream made me leap from my chair. It was the nightly hyena.

I went out on the porch and yelled at her: "I



told you yesterday I had no chicken and no corpse; go and look somewhere else!" She went away.

The militiaman, who was sleeping before my door, woke up, and, laughing, said to me: "*Crocuta!*" At first I thought I was being insulted. Not at all. Better informed than I, he was only telling me that it was a *Crocuta* hyena, whatever that is.

So morning came. Poor Colonials, my brothers!

Mossi! It's not an ordinary kingdom. Does any one know a country whose inhabitants are more polite? Two natives, each carrying a heavy and fragile load on their heads, meet; they recognize one another. Each immediately puts down his load in the middle of the street; the younger throws himself on the ground; the other imitates him. Face to face they bow their foreheads in the dust; then, elbows stretched wide apart, thumbs upright, they strike the ground with their forearms, not only three times, as I had been led to expect, but for a minute by my watch! They make the *poussi-poussi*.

And marriages? There are marriages of all sorts.

There is the marriage of girls born in the house of a nabob. They belong to him. Taken from their relatives as soon as they are old enough to serve him, the nabob entrusts them to his wives. They are the chief's small change, one might say, whom he hands out by way of a tip to any passer-by he likes.

There is the marriage of a girl given by her parents, as farmers, with us, give a chicken to their landlord. In all Africa women are pieces of property, and have no other standing. They have no will of their own. An act of hospitality, a debt to be paid, an evening when the father has drunk too much *dolo* (a beer made from meal) decide her future. When she is twelve she is sent, without ceremony, to the house of whoever is to possess her. He is often older than her father.

There is marriage by inheritance. When the head of a family dies his wives descend like his other goods. They go to whoever receives his cows. If that is to his sons, the mother becomes the wife of her sons.

There is regular marriage. As with us in France, the suitor sends a go-between. If the response is favorable, we, among us, offer an engagement ring.



The negro takes a chicken or a faggot. The visits continue; he doesn't take flowers, but sprouting grain. It's hard on him if the girl is the oldest of her family; then he must give a sheep, a guinea hen, a pickaxe, as well.

There are girls doomed to celibacy. The omens decide that. So as to obey the gods, the parents do not betroth her, but they reach an understanding with her suitor. The girl, one evening, goes to the wells — always on a dark night. The suitor and three of his strongest friends are in ambush, like panthers. As soon as the girl appears they leap upon her.

If they stun her, so much the worse! Once raped, she is taken home by the man who wants her. It's done. The gods have nothing to say.

Then there is the nomad woman, who goes from village to village, seeking hospitality. The good news spreads: an unattached woman is at such and such a house! The young men hurry there with gifts. She picks the winner.

The ceremony, whatever it may be, once over, the woman becomes a beast of burden. She no longer has any rights, except to be beaten. Her husband

sends her to pound the roads in his place. She carries the furniture, while the man rides ahead on his horse, cudgel on his shoulder, bow in hand. Her husband concedes her only one right: that of bewailing her lot. "A woman's tongue is her only weapon," he says. "She has no other way of defending herself." I wonder if that is why I heard so many complaints?

FETICH makers, magicians, sorcerers, witch doctors, make a fine living in this land. As a man is made up of three elements, body, soul and ghost, you can see what use the merry magicians make of ghosts! I saw this for myself one afternoon, when I wanted to be taken to the house of one Jacob, who carved, I had heard, delightful little pieces. The interpreter — who had no diploma! — showed me the way, but didn't want to go with me.

"I'll give you some beer," I told him. "Come with me — I'll never find Jacob's hut by myself."

Then he told me about his father's ghost. The sorcerer had warned him that it was somewhere in Jacob's neighborhood.



“Oh, don’t be afraid,” I insisted. “I’m a great medicine man; if the ghost comes near I’ll exorcise it.”

But he said the ghost would make his hair stand on end and terrify him into a fit of ague.

“I have plenty of quinine, and I’ll plait your hair for you. Come along.”

He said his father had been so wicked that his ghost would certainly tear his soul from his body.

“Is that going to make you give up a chance to drink some *dolo*? Come along!”

He replied that he could, in fact, live several days without his soul, but that if its absence were too prolonged he would die.

“Oh, come! You know I’m going to see the Morho Naba to-morrow; if the ghost takes your soul from you I’ll tell him he must get it back for you.”

That seemed to convince him. He went along — for two hundred meters. Suddenly he turned and ran away, his hair standing on end. He explained, later, that that was the ghost’s doing. I had supposed it was owing to the wind raised by his flight!

As to burials.

One day a dead body, already stiff, lay stretched out, close to a tree, its two feet in ghats.¹ That intrigued me. It was a Lobi custom. They believe the animal heat lasts much longer when that is done. Members of the family fanned flies from the body with an ox's tail. The men danced, the women chanted. Two chickens were brought, which added desperate squawks to the din, until their throats were cut. The fate of the chickens made me thoughtful. I went away.

I saw another dead body, but lying in a grave, this time. That was a Mossi burial. The relatives threw coins on the body, that it might buy water when it was thirsty, and pay for its passage on the road to eternity. The *laghda*, the grave digger, filled the grave. That done, he began to speak, and the family, nodding, approved of what he said.

“Take this money,” he said, to the dead man. “Don’t squander it — be sober and thrifty. Don’t let your ghost come back here to haunt us, let it join your ancestors at once at Pilimpikou.” (That is the village where the dead meet their dead relatives.)

¹ French expression—canabries?



“You have walked long enough. Above all, do not return, so that what you have left on the earth may benefit your heirs.”

Comforted, the heirs went away.

XVI
HIS MAJESTY

A FRIDAY morning. The main avenue of Ouagadougou, which is endless, shadeless, merciless, was empty. It was empty as it is on Monday, on Tuesday, from Wednesday to Sunday, not only in the morning, but in the afternoon, the evening, and the night. Drenched in sunlight, it slept.

It was nearly ten o'clock. Yonder, below, fifteen hundred meters away, dust rose in the road. It moved toward me. Who was sending it ahead? It approached, and from it a compact group emerged.



There were men on horseback, others on foot. I began to see more distinctly. The men on foot were gesticulating like mechanical scarecrows. They could only be driving away evil spirits, since no one was before them. They cried out. I heard the music of tin plates being beaten. Rawhide drums resounded under the beating of nervous hands. An umbrella dominated the procession.

Friday? That was it! The Morho Naba was going to the Governor, to make his weekly visit of state. His *sonores* — his favorites — ran before him. The Bindi Naba, minister of music, urged the musicians on to their best efforts. The Ouidi Naba, Master of the Horse, directed the royal steed. He had plenty to do; a big negro, dressed like an ostrich, made such gestures that the horse was frightened; he was the Pouy Naba, the chief medicine man. I should have had him to drive away my bats!

Riding two files behind the sovereign came the Tapsebo Naba, the war chief. He had a panther's skin for saddle. Four riders surrounded him with four spears. But how came a dog to follow him so tamely? I saw that it was because he was tied to his



horse's tail! He must have represented the pack of hounds of the royal hunt! Ahead of this thrilling procession was the Ouagadougou Naba, the chief of police, with eyes like a falcon's.

His Majesty was under the umbrella, a cotton umbrella with two ribs sticking through its fabric. He called himself Naba Kôm, chief of the water, and he was afraid of the rain! At a glance, he seemed to weigh more than the horse. I thought of Sancho Panza, blackened by the sun, and looking for his master, who had set out to free the blacks. But the sovereign's look was proud.

Then there was the Nemdo Naba, the chief steward, and the Naralle Naba, whose duty it was to select sacrificial victims for the royal tombs. I hid behind a mango tree. Then the Ouedranga Naba, the personal equerry.

The court had passed. The dust settled. But who was coming, running a brilliant hundred-meter dash? Another one, who hadn't been ready at the moment of setting out! It was the Kamoro Naba, the Grand Eunuch. Was the harem on fire?

Naba Kôm is no petty princeeling, but the last



of the African emperors. Of three million inhabitants of the Mossi country a million and a half acknowledge him. The etiquette of his court is strict. At seven in the morning, on the firing of a gun, the Morho Naba wakes up. If he happens to open his eyes earlier, so much the worse for him; he stays in bed. Favorites, wives and nabobs come running to him. Tom-toms beat. To the sound of music he dons a red robe and leaves the palace at once.

The Ouedranga Naba, his equerry, holds a horse, ready saddled. His Majesty leaps upon the beast, crying: "I want to go to Lâ! I want to go to Lâ!" His first wife, the Pugtiema, offers him a basket, containing the food that is to satisfy him till he reaches Lâ. But the Kansoro Naba approaches. (I don't know how to tell you this nabob's duties; forgive me, but I have forgotten; I think, though, that this is his only task.)

"Sire," he says, "order them to unsaddle your horse; you will go there to-morrow."

To go to Lâ really means to go out to make war against the Morho Naba of Ouhahigouya, his perpetual enemy. Naba Kôm drops his rein and scowls.

The whole court prostrates itself. He stamps his foot twice, sends the Pugtiema's basket flying with a strong hand, and, in a rage, cursing the cowards who keep him from doing his duty, hurries back into his palace.

His favorites follow him. These are young boys, from eight to fifteen years of age, chosen from among the handsomest. They have, among other duties, the tasks of pouring out his drinks, moving his cushion and his mat about, carrying his umbrella (they might very well re-cover that for him), and his sword, holding his stirrups, ushering in visitors, and — the younger ones — of sleeping in the palace.

They do their hair like women, and, like women, they wear copper bracelets and anklets. But they are forbidden to visit the women. Each year the Pouy Naba, the chief sorcerer, subjects them to the ordeal of the gourd, like the women. According to the manner in which their faces are reflected in the water, they are declared innocent or guilty. Thieves are put to death. We have forbidden this ordeal — but can we always be present?

Favorites and musicians never leave His Maj-



esty. Day and night they await his gestures of command. No one speaks. No voice must be raised in the royal presence. Bowing deeply, all receive his orders. If the king drinks, the favorites clap their hands and music sounds. If he coughs, if he wipes his nose, if he sneezes, if he spits, if his stomach, rising toward his throat, gives voice to its enjoyment of too good a dinner, the favorites snap their fingers and the violins accompany them!

So it goes until dark. At sundown the Baloum Naba, the Intendant, appears, bearing a gourd. Bowing before the door of the palace, he pours out a libation of water to the royal soil. Then he lights the night fire.

A QUARTER to three. Xavier, my interpreter, was not present. I hoped he hadn't met his father's ghost! The Morho Naba expected me. He had caused *dolo* to be bought at the market in my honor. Still Xavier did not come. Three o'clock. I set out by myself.

Put the colonies in their place? I'd like to. But one must begin, in some cases, at the beginning. Here, for instance, one will get nowhere unless one



began by saying to the sun: "Listen, this can't go on, you're burning up the earth, you're sucking out the gray matter of mankind, you keep the very dogs from barking. Come here, you're to be put in your place!"

There should be a law to put the sun in his place in Africa. That was my opinion as I set out on foot to go to visit the Morho Naba.

I was going to be late. Of course, I could think up some plausible excuse, but suppose he subjected me to the ordeal of the gourd? I damned Xavier. He'd been brought up by the missionaries; he was a Catholic. Of course, he had also spent a good deal of time with the medicine men. But why couldn't he have been on time?

The palace was in sight; a great structure of mud which we had had built for the sovereign. I saw a great collection of madmen running around — who wouldn't understand a word I had to say, of course.

I arrived, and knocked boldly at the door. Two fine fellows threw themselves down and made me the *poussi-poussi*. I hesitated about returning their courtesy. It takes a lot of practice to be graceful about



striking one's forearms on the earth with one's thumbs held up in the air! Still, I did raise my thumbs, and they understood my meaning. I went on as far as the great staircase. But there was the chief sorcerer, the one who scared me with his feathers. I didn't want to salute him, so I turned my thumbs down. It didn't seem to vex him; he played rooster before me. I stepped on the first stair. Had my foot touched a bell? Immediately the court came out *en masse*, the king at their head, and ranged itself on the fifth step. I was in a fine state! Happily, the musicians started their tom-toms. I went straight to the king, shook hands with him, and said:

“Is your father well? Is your mother well? Is your horse all right?” I wondered if he might not reply: “Is your sister well?”

Next we had to go into the throne room.

Naba Kôm wore a priestly robe of velvet bound with wine-colored wool, spangled and embroidered. He had at least eight kilos on his shoulders. He must have blessed me! His thighs were enormous; he walked with the tread of an elephant. His throne was raised high. He reached it and seated himself. His

favorites surrounded him; the musicians took their places. The Baloum Naba placed me in a chair opposite. We looked at one another. We must have looked intelligent!

Taking no more notice of His Majesty, I passed on to an inspection of the throne room. It was decorated with four old pictures taken from newspapers. I saw General Dodds entering Abomey, the degradation of Dreyfus, the sack of the Summer Palace in Peking, the assassination of Sadi Carnot. On the other side a bat was stretched out, its wings making it look like a cross, on the wall. Here was one who knew how to deal with bats!

Suddenly the king made a personal noise. The music played, the favorites snapped their fingers. I gave the sovereign a severe look. It didn't cure him. He tapped his velvet robe, wondering all the time, I suppose: "Will he clear out soon, this pest?"

I felt that I had to say something.

"Is the *dolo* good this year, sire?"

He moved in his wicker chair, which provoked a new outburst of noise. And then Xavier appeared, sweating, out of breath, his sides heaving.



“Look at the hole you’ve got me into!” I said to him.

He was already down, his forehead on the ground, beating his forearms as a chicken does its wings.

“I suppose you met Papa’s ghost again, eh? What a fine fellow you turned out to be! You loafed on your way, eh? When will you get it through your thick head that you’ve got to show up on time? Do you never look at your watch? Oh, yes — at the case, though, not the hands — because the case is shinier! Show a little sense! You have a helmet already, and spectacles . . .”

The king tapped his velvet robe more and more fretfully.

“True enough — we’re not here to discuss our trivial troubles! Tell the king I’m very grateful, and that he’s a very good sort.”

The chief of the waters seemed pleased. He smiled amiably.

“Heavens, it’s hot!” I cried.

“Take off your vest,” said Xavier.

“Are you crazy? In the king’s palace?”

But that was all right, it seemed. I took off my vest.

The Bindi Naba, seated before a drum, passed his thumb over the rawhide; it was like the noise of the passing of a motor bus.

“Why does he do that, Xavier?”

“He’s imitating the roar of a lion.”

“To make me go away?”

“To do you honor!”

“Ask the king if he would like to come to the Colonial Exposition at Paris?”

“He says he is not allowed to leave his territories, but that last year he went to Dakar and cried so hard that, as the result, he really is going to Paris.”

“Tell him he’s a fine psychologist!”

Xavier translated. The Morho Naba looked less pleased.

“What did you tell him? He looks annoyed.”

“I couldn’t translate psychologist. I told him he was a very sly fellow.”

His Majesty made a sign. The courtiers, rolling on their feet, got up. I thought he was vexed. No.



He was only ordering *dolo*. Two *sonores*, his particular favorites, appeared, bearing glasses. The King took his, I took mine. Hardly had the glasses touched the royal lips when triumphant music filled the air. He lowered the glass; the music stopped. Then I wanted my triumph, too. I drank. Silence. I drank again. Not a drum beat, not a single snap of a finger. I finished the glass, down to the fly at the bottom. It didn't move them at all. There wasn't the tiniest note of a little fife. Those people didn't know how to pay tribute to real bravery.

“Very well! Tell him I'm going.”

This time Xavier spoke French. All the negroes, high and low, could understand what he had to say.

“Sire! *Le blanc fiche son camp!*”

I saw the royal face break into a smile.

OH, MY WHITE BROTHERS!

THE white man?

Silent Africa is nothing but a football field.

There are two teams, always the same teams,
both white.

One wears the government colors; the other the
colors of the business men.

The negro is the ball.

The game is fiercely played for the possession
of the ball.

The white official protects the negro against the



business man, but uses him for his own purposes. The business man accuses the official of doing with the negro precisely what all others are forbidden to do.

The official treats the business man like a *margouillat*. A *margouillat* is a little lizard with suckers in its paws, which is always dying of hunger and catches all the mosquitoes within reach on the wing.

The business man says the official is another Denys, tyrant of Syracuse.

The official insists that, except for him, the business man would rob and exploit the negro; the man of affairs retorts that if the official forbids him to exploit the negro, it is only so that he may do so himself without interference.

I REACHED Bobo-Dioulasso. That was no small Residency planted in the brush. Bobo-Dioulasso is an African cross-road, uniting the Soudan, the Haute-Volta and the Ivory Coast. It is an old negro stronghold; there is an astonishing quarter in which the streets do not pass before the houses, but through them. Through the kitchen of one, the bedroom of



the next. The inhabitants would be at home only in their windows — if there were windows! It is rather a magnificent idea in city planning. Husbands need no longer ask themselves the dreary old question: “Shall I go out? Shall I go home?”

One is out and home at the same time, and since one spends all one’s nights in public, one need never get up.

My blood boiling with an honest indignation, an harangue on my lips, my heart breaking, in a rage, I observed the women on the platforms. As a matter of fact, they weren’t platforms. A big piece of quartz thrust through a hole deformed their lower lips; that taken out, one saw their tongues or their saliva coming through the hole — a disgusting sight!

Why not have some regard for æsthetics, Monsieur the Governor? A woman is a woman, after all, the devil take it! You say we must respect native customs? Rot! We do — as long as they don’t bother us. We’ve abolished plenty of others — and ones more deeply rooted. We forbade them to throw their slaves to the crocodiles on the pretext that the beasts were gods, and to kill their servants so that the beloved



dead might have company — then why allow them to change their women into ducks?

So, then, I had come to the famous town of Bobo-Dioulasso. Immediately four white men hurled themselves upon me. The commandant was with me; they got me away from him, and said: "We want to talk to you." And: "May we?" they said, over my shoulder, to the official, who made, with his hands, a sign betokening his complete indifference. "We represent the merchants and traders of Bobo," explained my assailants. I made an appointment with them for five o'clock.

"So," I said to the commandant, "it's the same way here, is it? You eat one another's livers?"

The liver and the nose. They devour one another. The commandant complained bitterly because he lacked a prison adequate to contain certain merchants and care for them as they deserved.

"You're like your colleague at Houndé, who says he needs a lion tamer, not a governor. Do you also fly the black flag over your residency — with the skull and cross bones?"

The day before, at Houndé, I had seen that tat-



tered emblem over the door of the French Residency. It was the traditional pirate standard, the flag of the "brethren of the coast." You must understand that it is so that all the waifs, the adventurers, the wanderers, all the ruined men washed by the tide on the hot coasts of Africa, are described. It was so that the commandant sought to pay a just tribute to his compatriots. The day before I left him he sent the following telegram to the governor:

I am the sickest man you ever saw. This morning, at the cotton market, I weighed myself on a trader's scales. It was ten o'clock, and the scale showed that I weighed seventy-five kilos. An hour later I came back, and, horrors, when I stepped on the same scales, I weighed only fifty kilos! The loss of twenty-five kilos in an hour seems to me reason enough to appeal to you, in your high benevolence, for convalescent leave!

Ah, clever, brilliant Huchart, you deserve thanks! Fantasy is not quite dead in the colonies!

IT was five o'clock. I kept my appointment. In a court, before a new house, there were eighteen



Frenchmen, each carefully arrayed in a newly pressed white suit. Who were they?

They were neither lazy nor cowardly. No chicken blood ran in their veins. They boasted more of their hot blood than of their coolness and discretion. These were men who had crossed the seas to make their fortunes.

Some had already made money, lost it, and were now looking for more. Others were just beginning the game; would it be heads or tails for them? There were young fellows who had made home too hot to hold them, and whose relatives, to get rid of them, had sent them to the country of the angry cow. They had fine teeth; they were splendid animals — though carnivorous! They were all for action.

The merchants made me free of the house. Champagne was being cooled in buckets. The tables were set. We sat down.

“I am Pretefort,” said one, pulling his chair forward. “They call me Guelefort; every one can’t speak at once, after all. So I will be spokesman. First, then, how are you? If you are ill, we’ll see that you are taken care of. As for us, sometimes we’re well,



sometimes we're sick, but we keep going, just the same. Do you know where you have come? Right into the Middle Ages! If you compromise yourself with us, and the commandant will have no more to do with you, then you need only lie down outside there and live off winged ants. For the negroes their native chiefs, for the whites the European chiefs, rule as if from the keep of a medieval castle.

"It can't go on. Enlistments for the army are depopulating our colonies. You can't keep track of the abandoned villages. Our frightened laborers take refuge with the English. When the recruits leave they are gentle and naïve; when they come back they are accomplished scoundrels.

"They have enfranchised the negroes. I'll bet you four elephants' tusks against a guinea chicken that pretty soon the Soudan, the Ivory Coast and the rest will each be sending a deputy to the Seine. When that time comes the French on the coast might as well jump in the sea, and, as for us, we might very well bury ourselves in an ant hill.

"Instead of training mechanics, smiths, carpenters, we make *Akaoúes* of the blacks, intellectuals,



who, thinking the King of France is dead, take the Republic for his widow!

“Our laws, which aren’t much use to us, fail completely with the blacks. The colonial judiciary, so badly paid that it has to live on the banana parings the hogs leave, has become the fief of the half-breeds and the pure blacks. Sessions in the court-house have become circus performances. Our children go there to amuse themselves, and cry when we keep them away.”

Just then the orator was stopped in the full flight of his charming speech.

“Speak of our affairs!” cried one of his colleagues.

“I’m coming to them. Our method of considering the economic problem here is opposed to the official notion. In a word, the officials think all merchants are thieves.”

“Intruders, adventurers,” suggested another.

“No,” said I. “Rather starvelings, *margouillats*. I can see your old dreams in your faces. They’re nothing to be ashamed of. You wanted to make your fortunes.”



“Yes!” they all cried together.

“But — in two years, and at the expense of the negro!”

“Oh, no — no! For fourteen years I’ve had fever, been bilious, suffered from ticks, from the Ivory Coast to the limits of the Soudan! Fourteen years . . .”

He was interrupted again. Another of the eighteen got up.

“In two years, you say? And why not?”

“Be still,” one of his friends said to him. “You alarm me — shut your mouth! We’re not here for art’s sake, that’s understood, nor to help the negroes to gain an earthly Paradise. Still, we’re all honest fellows. Listen to what I have to tell you: The commandant wants to make money out of the blacks, but he won’t let us do so. He says: ‘There you shall pay ninety centimes for cotton, there two-francs-forty.’

“But I say that where you pay eighteen sous for cotton, the negro sells it to his own kind for two-Francs-fifty; where you pay two-francs-forty, the local weaver buys it for four-francs-fifty. You know very well that they compel the negro to produce cot-



ton and sell it to us, and that, in the end, all he gets out of it is blows with a whip. If the price weren't fixed, we'd buy cotton at whatever price was set by the law of supply and demand. That's obvious, isn't it? So you have the trick of the scales."

They all laughed.

"That's our reply to the fixed price. Ninety centimes? Call it eighteen sous. But the French market calls upon us to buy it for fourteen sous. The scales keep the peace."

"Yes," I said, "but how about the negroes?"

"The negroes? Let the government begin considering them! For it, the negro is never tired. He crosses the whole land on foot, he becomes emaciated on the road, he dies on the railway work. We're lucky if we're not expected to transport negroes in hammocks! The government beggars the negro with requisitions. You know that. The government robs the negro, but, so that he may have money to pay his taxes the government lets us buy from him what it does not take away. Isn't that true? Yes or no?"

I had nothing to say. His gesture was one of accusation.



“Yes, let the government make a start in considering the negro!” he cried. “What law justifies the government in paying for a chicken ten sous, when we must pay ten francs; in requisitioning butter, milk, snake and panther skins? Try to buy a panther’s skin! Offer two hundred francs for one — the hunter will refuse it, take it to the commandant, and be glad, the idiot, to get twenty francs!”

“The commandants aren’t well enough paid themselves,” I said. “Their English and Belgian colleagues are paid four times as much. You can’t blame them for being thrifty housekeepers.”

“All right, but if the Republic lets them be thrifty at the expense of the blacks it oughtn’t to forbid us to do business with them.”

“Oh, well,” I said, “the negroes aren’t very fat now — if you were both turned loose on them they’d soon be as flat as pancakes!”

We drank some champagne. Then Pretefort again:

“Do you know what the commandant did to me, day before yesterday? He had a tom-tom beaten for three hours under the windows of my dying wife.



Well — do you know what I shall do? He's not the only one with devoted negroes! I'll have him beaten up by my Kroo men, trussed up, and I'll send him to Ouagadougou, with a tag on his belly, on which the Governor may read:

“ ‘We couldn’t do anything with him — perhaps you can! ’ ”

So!

Oh, my white brothers!

XVIII
VARIOUS MATTERS

LUNCH at Houndé, in the French Residency, a stop in the depths of the brush. Everything was peaceful. There, two months earlier, a white man and a white woman, the masters of that solitary place, had killed themselves for the sake of killing themselves. There had been no question of jealousy, of lost honor, no suffering beyond endurance, no motive at all. They had merely answered the call of the bitterest of countries. Both had been obedient to the voice that Africa which, from time to time, as-



sumes to lure the whites to destruction. The woman had gone to bed with the sole intention of being killed. The man had killed her and then himself. The boy said that in the morning he found the commandant and madame commandant very, very sick. They had been dead for six hours. The hyena had had plenty to say, that night!

Dinner at Banfora. In that Residency drama had stalked only three weeks before. The commandant was asleep under his netting. It was one o'clock in the morning. A negro's dagger had cut, at a single stroke, the netting and the commandant's throat.

That was a chief's vengeance, delegated to one of his bravos. A black was in prison, but what good was that?

The palm trees swayed gently in the wind.

XIX

THE COTTON MARKET

HERE we were at Bouaké, on the Ivory Coast. A whole village, sacks on its heads, children on its backs, was marching to the cotton market. Whence? I didn't know. How came it to take to the road? Thus — the commandant at Bouaké had sent a rifleman.

“Come on! Hep! Hep! Snap into it, you dirty niggers!” (You understand, of course, that the rifleman is as black as the rest, but he represents authority.) “Ten tons of cotton, for the market at Bouaké!



Four days to pick it; two days to carry it there.
Snap into it, you loafers!"

In the village, brandishing his whip, the rifleman installed himself in the chief's house. He called for the handsomest wench; for drink and food. Armed with an authority which made him the peer of the former negro kings, he confused, in his own mind, the power he actually did represent with that which he conferred upon himself. He drank, ate, changed one woman for another. These simple fellows express their sense of their majesty so crudely in their faces that you still laugh, days after seeing them. I saw one of them once, sitting still, cross-legged, and calling, in a voice like thunder, though there wasn't so much as a cat within hearing: "Faster! Run! A little service here!"

"Who are you talking to?" I asked him.

He slapped his knees, and said, gravely:

"It's by my commandant's orders!"

So, now, the cotton carriers were hurrying toward Bouaké. They went willingly. Borne down by their loads, they still smiled at you when they met you. The rifleman was the sheep dog. Men, women

and children, all were part of the procession. They wouldn't see their homes again for four days, but they were about to look upon the commandant's countenance! Those who brought bad cotton would get, as a matter of course, some days in jail. They hurried.

They reached the town. They entered the court of the Residency, put down their bags, and opened them. They stood in line. The soldier admired his work, and, with an official mien, entered the office of the god of the brush. Leaning against the door jamb, he put his hand in his girdle, and said, in a voice of thunder:

“Commandant! The cotton is gathered!”

Then began the ceremony. The commandant went out; he examined each bag.

“*Atakoúe!*” he said. “*Atakoúe!* Very good — very good. Go and have it weighed.”

The lucky ones went toward the official scales.

“Cull it!”

That one set to sorting the good cotton from the bad.

To another:



“To jail with you!” And to the next: “To jail!”

Their cotton wasn’t prime; they went off, by themselves, to jail. Did they understand that they deserved no better fate?

At the scales accounts were made up. That day, cotton was selling at two-francs-forty. The clerk wrote, on a small piece of paper: “26 kilos at 2 fr. 40 — 62 francs 40.” That was what the cotton buyer was to pay them. Confidence reigned.

The rifleman stayed in the center of the yard, seeming to wait for something.

“Sanna!” the commandant said to him: “Good work! You shall have fifty francs as reward.”

He would have a good time with the fifty francs, but it was, above all, the honor that suddenly set Sanna beside himself. His happy heart was in his eyes.

“Thank you, commandant!” he shouted.
“Thank you — thank you — thank you!”

Now the negroes went out into the town to attend to their business. In the business quarter the traders were in front of their desks. They wore an ironic look. It was as if they were saying: “Do you



see how the government treats us whites?" They weren't allowed to move. If a black clerk ran after a cotton seller — to jail with him! But they were allowed to call out to the sellers:

"Hey! Hey! Come over here! Sixty-two-francs-forty?" said a white man. "I'll give you sixty-four francs. Sell me your bag."

The negro ran away. He wanted sixty-two-francs-forty, not sixty-four.

Is there, anywhere on earth, a better animal?

xx
WOODCUTTERS

I WENT among the woodcutters. The Ivory Coast forest was farther down. But it was where I was that the wholesale jobbing in man power was going on. For the railway and public works recruiting was official; for the wood cutting it was only tolerated. It is one of the dramas of Africa.

“This is what breaks my heart,” said a commandant.

The commandants are divided among themselves; some favor the recruiting for the wood cutting, some oppose it.



“As for me, I’m against it. This year, in spite of orders, I haven’t sent a man to the forest. It’s slavery, neither more nor less. I refuse to become a slave dealer.”

How is it that it’s allowed to go on?

Oh, that’s simple enough. The governor of the colony advises the commandant, by telegraph, that Mr. Oak, lumberman, has authority to raise three hundred men in his district. Mr. Oak arrives.

If the commandant happens to have no ideas of his own on this subject, he tells his interpreter: “Go into the villages and tell the chiefs I need three hundred men.”

The interpreter goes and obeys orders. He says no more, but the chiefs know their business. They also know that if the commandant doesn’t get his three hundred men they will go to jail. So they supply them — from their “prisoners,” you will understand.

Suppose the commandant is unwilling? That brings about tragic scenes in the brush Residencies.

“I’ll have you fired!” cries the lumberman.

“Get out of my house!”



I was present at one of those scenes. A black chief was there, too.

“Listen, commandant,” he said. “On January one I paid your tax. You told me: ‘Plant cocoa.’ I planted cocoa. You see that you are obeyed. If you tell me: ‘Send men to cut logs for Monsieur the Lumberman,’ I will send you men, because I know you can do me a mischief. But the men perish there.”

“I give you no orders,” said the commandant. “Do you understand? None!”

“Then what will become of my logs? You are a witness, Monsieur Londres, to the way Colonials are helped!”

“Couldn’t you use tractors instead of men?” I asked.

“And will you give me the money to buy tractors?”

France is rich; so are the colonies. But we have an intelligence no greater than that which the times impose upon us. Capital takes no interest in colonial affairs, and the Frenchman, in his richest gold mines, still uses the old-fashioned methods. The English and



the Belgians have everything modern ; we have only the banana-engine — the negro !

Well — what does one see then ? One sees the man-market at Bouaké. It's quite picturesque. There are sly fellows who, well aware of the difficulties of the lumbermen, go higher up and recruit any way they can in the Haute-Volta, the reservoir. Knowing the value of time, they bring their merchandise down in trucks and turn their prisoners over, at two hundred francs a head, to the embarrassed lumbermen.

But, of course, there are no more slavers !

THE lumberman ?

Romantic novelists will soon be making copy of him. The legends that cling to the gold miner await the lumberman. Without him Africa would be flatter ; he gives it relief.

You mustn't look at the lumberman at Grand-Bassam. There his glory is reflected only by his bank account. Deprived of his halo, he shines only by virtue of his polished shoes. He wears those even when he should be wearing seven-league boots. You can't



imagine the effect that two polished shoes produce when you see them waving in the deep brush under an overturned carriage. It was so, this afternoon, that I met M. Pujol, on a recruiting trip. Happily, it takes more than that to kill a lumberman. M. Pujol was getting along very well already.

These men, plagued by the devil of quick riches, living in a dream of millions, project their bold silhouettes in another field of endeavor. The forest.

If the blacks suffer there, so do the whites. The life of the head of a lumber camp is a frightful adventure.

The forests of the Ivory Coast are no glades in which to take a walk, but vast and gloomy places in which from the carpet of leaves there rises a smell as rank as death. Like the negro, the white lives there like a beast, the only one of his race; often he falls in his tracks. If he dies, he can bury himself. On holidays, when he lacks canned goods, he can feast on monkey's brains. He gets odd ideas. Thus it was one of these fellows who thought he was being only kind when he wrote, as seriously as you please, to a nun,



director of the orphanage at Grand-Bassam, begging her to select a mistress for him herself — the prettiest of her charges !

These young men, whose strength finally wanes, but whose stomachs never go back on them, never stop scolding. You may see them, prodded by their professional consciences, jump up from the fallen trunk on which they sit, cross legged, and go off, in a rage, after deserters. They don't catch them all. Ten thousand negroes, having fled from the task of dragging logs, live like red monkeys, outside the villages, between Dimbokro and Abidjan.

In the evening the slaves of the forest return from the logging ground to their camp — their chief with them. A wretched return, both for the harried white man and the exhausted blacks. There is no sound except the raucous cry of the blue turaco, a bird which utters a cry like the wail of a ghost from beyond the tomb. Then the young Frenchman enters his shelter of banana leaves. He sets out his bottles of *apéritif* on his table, and perhaps, in the dusk, he sings a song like this:



Woodcutter —

What do you hear in the black forest?

I don't hear any violins,

Like those whose lives are happy

But in my woods I hear the echo

Of the voice of my chief Bete

Hauling his log from Iroko!

XXI
THE SPEAKING FOREST

THE forest! The appalling kingdom of the lumberman!

I had left Abidjan to find a logging ground. One cannot breathe freely on this Ivory Coast. One feels as if one were under a bell, as if men needed to be ripened artificially!

The forest is beautiful; the road is a fine sight.

I was to find the place I wanted between Abidjan and Dabou. But I was not a native; I had to feel my way. Milestones, beside the road, announce: "Tiama,



57." And, farther on: "Mouchibanaye, 80." I could not find either Tiama or Mouchibanaye on my map. It was only when I saw "Mahogany, 47" that I understood that these signs concerned trees, not towns. Those were only the markers of the prospectors.

Where was the logging ground? I could not just take to the trail blindly; I would lose my way, fall asleep, and the ants would eat me up — which is no figure of speech, let me tell you! .

I stopped the negroes I met and had recourse to my universal language imitating a man felling a tree, and those who haul logs. They all understood me, but they came from far away; they, too, were strangers here.

I got out of the carriage and tried a path. The wrong one. The leaves weren't crushed.

Finally, here's a black chief. You know a chief by his *boubous*, but even more certainly because he is healthy and fat. This one weighed about a hundred and ten kilos; a great chief. He was on his way toward Abidjan, followed by two servants. I pantomime my speech.

“Oh — the woodsmen? The men who are sent to die?”

He made signs to show that it was farther on.

At last I saw the tracks of a Decauville truck. I followed them. The forest doesn’t delight you; far from attracting, it repels you. You don’t go ahead with a gay and cheerful manner. If you followed your instinct you’d turn and go back, indeed. To cover a hundred meters makes you feel as if you had gone a long, long way. It seems to me that those who, for sport, go into the woods for a picnic are pretty bold! But that happens in France. Here in Africa no one would dream of such a thing.

It was very dark.

A naked man came down the road, a hatchet on his shoulder. His eyes were bloodshot; his body was bent. It was the first time I had ever seen an utterly worn-out negro. He looked at me with surprise and interest.

“The logging ground?” I asked him.

He showed me that he had come from it. A tornado was gathering. The wind was rising in the tree tops; it was growing cooler.



I walked on for an hour. No more truck tracks. But the fresh footprints were enough of a guide now. Another negro appeared. He took me for an overseer, and showed me, by way of passport, a crushed and bleeding finger.

I said "All right!" — just as if I had anything to say to him!

All at once the forest began talking. At first it was a distant murmur I heard, as if some one were chanting a litany. Though the forest was still mute, I heard cries:

"Ah ya! Ah ya! Ah ya! Ya! Ya! Ya! Yaaaa! Yaaaa!"

The voices guided me. I came upon their source. A hundred naked negroes, harnessed to a log, were trying to haul it.

"Yaaaa! Yaaaa!"

The head man beat time with his whip. He seemed to be having a fit. He shouted: "Ya-ho! Ya-ho ko-ko!" And then. "Ya-ho — Ro-ko-ko!"

In their mighty effort those men who were doing the work of horses gave all their strength. They pulled, heads bent. A rain of lashes fell upon their

bent backs. The thongs cut their faces. Drops of blood marked their tracks.

There was a general bellowing. You could imagine a pack of hounds rushing out as its kennels were flung open. Master of hounds, huntsman, whips, barking. I saw a white man, who ignored my presence. I went over to him.

“This life in the forest interests me,” I said. “I’ve wanted to see how the work was done.” I introduced myself. “Londres,” I said.

“Martel,” he answered.

He was thin; he looked worried. He was twenty-six years old. His eyes gleamed; they looked as if they were set in the sockets in a skull. A whistle hung from his belt. He was sweating profusely.

“My God, what a business to be in!” he said. “A fool’s calling — and still I stick to it! I will pull myself together when I take my vacation.”

“When will that be?”

“Oh, not for eight months yet! Hey, there — will you pull?”

“Ah ya! Ah ya! Ah ya! Yaaa! Yaaa!”

A negro came running up.



“Boss Martel, Boss Martel!” he cried, “the hewers are running away! Tiama has spoken, and they’ve all deserted!”

Suddenly seized by panic before the great tree they had nearly felled, the choppers had taken to flight.

“They will ruin the tree! Oh, the bastards! And you, you idiot!” cried Martel to the head man.

He explained that he had whipped the deserters as hard as he could, but that, refusing to go on with their work, they had insulted him by calling his mother names. Plunging through the humus, we went to the scene of this new drama. The tree still stood, but a breath would have brought it down. The head man pointed with his hand: “They went that way!”

“We’ll attend to them!” said Martel.

And at once the white man and his negro chief of staff set off at full speed through the forest. But at that moment the tornado that had been threatening burst upon us; for an hour we had to bear the brunt of it. The white man, having changed his mind, came back with two fresh axe men.

“That’s a thirty ton tree,” he said. “It will make

three logs, at eight hundred francs a ton. If they ruin the bottom, there'll be one log less — eight thousand francs lost!"

He approached the tree, and stroked its trunk proudly.

"There's a tree for you! I found it — a tiama, one of the African nut trees. Come on — get busy, you!" he shouted, to the hewers.

They began to ply their axes.

"Dundi!" shouted the head man. "Dundi!" That means, let's hurry.

The axes quivered in the flesh of the tree. The men struck, singing: "Dibadivo! Ah ya! Nidibile!"

They were words of their own; so they cheered themselves on. In the refrain the word *dibadivo* was spun out to a long, doleful note; the chant was one of exhausted men, such as one hears in hospitals. But the men continued to strike. Suddenly there was a crack. One of the negroes jumped clear; the other dealt a last blow; then he, too, jumped back. And the swaying tree fell, as all mighty things fall, with a tremendous noise, a majestic noise, to which there succeeded an equally mighty silence.



The head man came back. He hadn't been able to corner the deserters.

"I'll catch them to-morrow or next day — I know where they've gone," said the young white man.

"Won't they come back of their own accord to get their pay?"

"Oh, they don't care about the money! But they can't eat to-night except in a village, and I have an understanding with the chief; he'll send them back, with men to whip them along."

We went back to where the great log was being hauled.

"Look here, you know, I hate whipping them, but it has to be done. Besides, if you catch one of them doing something wrong and give him a good hiding for it, he doesn't hold it against you."

He showed me his stick.

"I always have my cudgel in my hand. They only know one way to work around here. It's too damned bad. But I do look after them. I don't steal their rations. They know that I'm fair, even if I'm severe. None of them dislikes me. There aren't many of my lot, for that matter, who don't serve out their



time. I have fewer deaths than any overseer in the region. It's too bad, but it can't be helped — machines can't take the place of niggers. You'd have to be a millionaire to try. The banana engine — there's none better! Moreover, it's only the negro who can get through this muck we work in."

Here was a logical young man. He had come to Africa to cut lumber. He cut lumber with whatever tools came to his hand. He played the game; he didn't break the rules.

"Come on! Pull! Pull!"

"Ah ya! Ah ya! Ah yaaa!"

"Just to take this log to the river will take me three days, provided the tornado doesn't slow us up too much. Oh, well — I've no more trees to fell for the moment; the moon is waxing, and you can't fell trees till after it's full." He turned to his head man. "Kouliko! You'll find me ten husky fellows to do some swimming — eh? I'll need them in three days."

"Are you going to have swimming races?"

"In the mud, yes — and I'll be in the lead! We have to get the logs into the water. It's not all a matter of felling trees, you see — they have to get to



Abidjan, and then to Grand-Bassam. So now I'll be a water-jockey, mounted on my rafts. Ah, I can tell you you need to be healthy in this job!"

"Do you make much money?"

"I? Oh, I'm not the boss; I'm only an overseer. I make enough to have a good time in Paris for three months once every two years." He sighed. "Ah! The Place Clichy about seven o'clock in the evening! The jolly little girls!"

He came back to his own fortunes.

"I bought shares in a gold mine, you understand, on the side, at Koukombo. It's a good idea to believe that miracles may happen! It's for us Colonials to set the example. And — well, anything can happen in this damned Africa — you never know! Kouliko! Go and tell them to carve the hind. You'll dine with me? There are no restaurants around here, you know. Do you like monkey's brains? It's an excellent dish. Kouliko! Kill a couple of monkeys on the way.

"And Odoz? Do you know Odoz, Monsieur Londres? He's worth forty millions to-day. He came from the Isère in rags. Ah, he has worked, that fel-



low! It took him fifteen years to make his millions here. He's the king of the lumbermen. I feel that I'm as good as he was!"

"But — you cough a great deal."

"I cough? Do you believe Odoz didn't cough, too? He's so crippled with rheumatism that he can't even walk any more. Millions? Look around you! There they are!" He pointed out the terrible forest, with a sweeping gesture. "It's the short handles for me, the muck, the thousand-pound logs, biliaryness! It's one of two things — either the forest makes you rich or it kills you. Heads or tails — the forest calls the turn!"

Ah ya! Ah ya! Ya! Ya! Yaaaa! Yaaaa!

“**W**HO are you?” I asked.

I was on my way at Chechi, at Kilometer 125, toward another logging ground. Passing through Dimbokro, one of the gateways of the Ivory Coast forest, I saw a white man in the village square who was planing planks. He was an old white man with a gray beard; shriveled and spent.

“I am Father Seri,” he said.

Only his skin was still white. In all other respects he was a negro. A gourd full of *couscous* and three yams were beside him, his rations for the day.



He was a combination of lumberman and gold seeker. His feet were bare, he wore ragged breeches, he was emaciated and dirty. He was sixty years old, and had spent thirty of them in the tropics. This adventurer looked like a ragpicker. He was making a sofa — for a negro chief.

“Do you need anything?” I asked him.

“Don’t worry about me. I’m all right here. Native food agrees with me better than any other. There was a time when I could have digested anything, but I have no teeth now. I live in the railway camp. Every one knows me.”

“Don’t you wear a helmet?”

“No. And yet I’ve heard it said that one must.”

A box full of pebbles and marked “Export Produce of Felix Potin” was near him.

“What’s this? Are you sending pebbles to Paris?”

“Ho!” he said. “That belongs to Golt. Don’t you know Golt? You’ve just arrived, haven’t you? Golt is my brother, my partner, an Englishman, who used to be a lieutenant in the Foreign Legion. He died last month.”



And, pointing to the box:

“This was his will.”

On the pebbles I saw a spoon, a knife, and a small plate.

“And this is his legacy. Golt is dead, but he found something. Bend down — look.”

“I just see pebbles,” I said.

“Golt found something. Gold. I’m the only one who knows where he found it. Golt’s family, one of these days, will get a letter from Seri. They’ll be rich, too! He left me the address.”

From the pocket of his shirt he brought out a dirty scrap of paper, the last thing written by the dead man; on it I read a lady’s name, and that of a street in Manchester.

“Don’t you know, Father Seri, that the colony could send you home?”

“Missionaries never go home. Let me finish this sofa, and you’ll see me on my way. Dying, Golt said to me: ‘Go there, down below!’ ”

“Is it far?”

“It’s where the gold is. But that’s my business. And you? So! You’re going to Chechi, among the



lumbermen? Here's what you must know about their profession. There are all sorts among them: clerks, former jockeys, but no loggers. They know nothing about logs, nothing. They cut down a tree seven meters high — and why? It's not the top of the tree that's valuable, but the bottom. The lumber is in the bottom. They ruin the forest. A black comes to them and says: 'I've found fifty mahogany trees.' They sacrifice all the rest to get the fifty mahogany trees. No forest can survive such methods. It's a massacre. No one can go where they have been. The mahogany hunters are a scourge. They ruin nature and the negroes. Axe and whip!"

With that the odd fellow went back to his sofa.

"Ah, well — good luck, Father Seri!"

I boarded the train.

"YOU'RE stopping at Kilometer one-twenty-five?" said the only European on board. "Then you'd better tell the engineer to slow down. Otherwise you'll get off at Chechi, and have four kilometers more on foot."



He was a small man, in good health, though the whites of his eyes were reddened. He told me he was a mahogany hunter.

“There are spies after me constantly,” he said. “They say: ‘The prospector has gone into the forest. Follow him.’ I have to be sly. I have to be careful. I never say where I am going. And you — you’ve begun by telling me that you’re going to Kilometer one-twenty-five! That’s no way to do. It’s open warfare in this country. Lizards eat mosquitoes, snakes eat lizards. Mongooses eat snakes. The white man devours the black. Keep your eyes open! Did you make a slip in your youth? Are you an exile? As for me — yes. I didn’t always behave myself in France. My coat of arms is blotted by a sentence of an assize court. The forest will rehabilitate me.”

“So, you’re a prospector?”

“Now, yes. I used to be overseer of a logging camp. Oh, they thought well of me! I earned that! The blacks were afraid of me. They called me the Panther. They said I was brutal. No — but there’s something about my eyes. I scared them. They said: ‘Boss Muss knows his business!’

“I began to give out, though. The climate uses you up fast, here. But, I give you my word, if it had come to the point of getting myself sent home as a pauper I’d have shot myself! Don’t ever saw wood, I tell you — that’s fatal! Hold your ground and bide your time. Use the means that come to your hand, without prejudice, men, children, women — even if they’re pregnant! So much the worse for them if their breasts sweep the ground. Above all, learn logs.

“One day I went into a village, took the women, and tied them to my automobile. I started moving. Then the men, who were hidden, came running to rescue their wives. So I hooked the men. Another hunch — instead of beating them all the time, fill them up with gin. That does the trick. Hello — here’s where you get off. We’re at one-twenty-five. There’s the camp. Good luck!”

So I jumped off the train, on the track, between the walls of the forest. My friend Bernard was waiting for me.

Here was a lumberman of another species. He preferred to be known as a worker, rather than as



an adventurer. From Bordeaux, body and tongue always active, he bore his twenty-five years on the Ivory Coast gracefully. He was one to make people say: "Africa kills men? Look at Bernard."

I was one day late in coming. I had lost that time before I got to Dimbokro, since I was traveling by motor. The rivers made the trouble. The ferries were always on the other bank, just as, at home, the concierge is always upstairs. It was half past six in the evening. I climbed the embankment.

"Half a million wood lice in my Iroko logs!" cried Bernard. "I thought the ants had eaten you!"

"Greetings, god of the forest!" said I.

ONE by one the jaded blacks came back from the field. They hadn't reached their quarters, but they stopped at the chief's house, this evening. It was the end of the month, pay day.

"You're just in time to see this performance," said Bernard. "Sit here beside me, at the table. Poincaré! Bring the lamp!"

“You have a Poincaré too?”

“It’s the fashion! How are you — all right, Poincaré?”

“Oh, yes, M. Benad.”

“Been drunk this month, have you?”

“I don’t get drunk any more, M. Benad.”

“Hello, here’s Eiffel-Tower! Still old, my poor Eiffel-Tower?”

“Always old, boss!”

Bernard looked over his two hundred men.

“Understand me!” he said to his head man. “No brutality! Recruiting is hard enough already. I have a good reputation — I don’t want to lose it in a fortnight. Don’t take my name in vain. What’s the matter with that fellow over there?”

“He was poisoned.”

“Are there any medicine men there? Who poisoned you, Samba?”

“Oh, I’m very sick!”

“Have you seen the medicine man?”

Samba didn’t answer. He lay stretched out. They carried him to camp.

The head man Poincaré approached Bernard.



“Missie,” he cried, “I’m an old servant, I’m a good head man. Give me a raise.”

“My heart will bleed, Poincaré, if you ask for another raise; my heart doesn’t want to pay out so much money.”

“But are you pleased with Poincaré?”

“Oh, you’re too much for me! You shall have fifty francs more a month!”

We sat behind the table. Two storm lanterns lit the scene; it was night.

“I must tell you, Monsieur Bernard,” said the overseer, “that the commandant’s clerk came, ten days ago, to arrange about the head taxes.”

“What? He had no right to do that. Did you pay him?”

“Yes.”

“You were wrong. These men must have paid their taxes to their own chiefs already. So, they’ll have paid twice. How much of their pay will they get for themselves? Well, it’s done. Poincaré, tell them that the commandant has come and collected their taxes, and that we’ll have to hold that much out of their pay for the month.”

Poincaré spoke.

“What have they to say?”

“They say it’s all right.”

“All right — let’s get on.”

The overseer, list in hand, called out the names.

“Zié!”

“Here!”

Zié had earned seventy-seven francs that month. The boss had paid eighty-eight francs for him in taxes: forty francs poll tax, forty-eight in lieu of forced labor as payment in kind. After a month’s work in the forest Zié owed eleven francs!

“Do you understand?” they asked him.

Bernard decided to hold out only fifty francs, that month. They gave him thirty-eight francs Zié said: “Thank you!”

“But look here, Bernard,” I said, “if they’re sent to work in the forest, how can they make payment in kind by labor? Why fine them forty-eight francs because one sort of work, rather than another, has been required of them?”

“That,” said Bernard, “is the way to deal with



niggers, that's all. We whites don't have to know why!"

There was a great outcry in the crowd.

"*Makou!*" shouted Bernard. There was silence.

All came forward as their names were called. They took what was offered, resignedly. They never asked any explanation. They would say to one: "Thirty francs!" He held out his hand, took the money, and went.

Mediki had worked a full month and had only twelve francs coming. He did seem to think that was a little too much of a good thing. He said: "Thank you! Thank you very much!" but he said it sarcastically.

"*Ticoubé!* Where is *Ticoubé?*"

"Gone to the brush!" said Poincaré. "Deserted."

He had thirty-two francs coming.

"*Georgea?*"

Deserted! Fifty-two francs to his credit.

"*Augustin?*"

"He's very sick," said the head man. "He hasn't eaten for a month."

"Then who has eaten his ration?"

“No rations,” said Poincaré. “No work — no food.”

“You’re scoundrels! Bring Augustin to me.”

Augustin appeared between two blacks, as between two crutches.

“What’s the matter with you, Augustin?”

“I’m very sick.”

“Give him Georgea’s fifty-two francs — and give him something to eat, you savages!”

“Tricoté? Hold on — you’ve no tax! How’s that?”

“Me?” answered Tricoté. “I’m a rascal. I’m very bad. I changed the name of my village.” He received seventy-six francs.

“Jeannot? Jeannot?” No one appeared. “He’s dead,” said the overseer. Maoudi and Robert II were dead, too. Goupi had only 22 francs coming.

“No tax, and you’ve only earned twenty-two francs?”

“He’s as lazy as a chicken!” said Poincaré.

Fifteen Betés passed in line.

“If any of the sick die, have them buried at once, or the Betés will eat them,” said Bernard.



And, to the cannibals: "Listen, if you eat your dead comrades I'll have you whipped."

Baoule had one hundred and twenty-eight francs in taxes charged to him, forty for himself, forty for his wife, forty-eight for redemption. He'd only made seventy-three francs.

"Give me ten francs, please," he begged, sadly.
They gave him thirty.

A month of agony in the forest, and only a debt to show for it? Does the organization of labor in Africa leave something to be desired, perhaps?

XXIII
MY BOY

HE was called Birama. I got him from the prison at Bamako. Not through any spirit of humanitarianism, though; nothing like that for me! But in Africa the prisons are the employment agencies. There the commandants and their favored white friends go when they want servants.

I found about a dozen prisoners in the yard of the jail. I picked one out, saying: "I'll take him. He doesn't look strong; if he goes for me, I could defend myself."



I'd made a mistake, though; he was a medicine man who had sacrificed a baby in some voodoo rites. So they let me pick one of the others. One was a roly-poly fellow, with frizzy hair. He was as much of a negro as you'll ever see. His face seemed to suggest so many races that, in the end, I took to calling him the Negro Congress. That was Birama. I took him home with me.

I began by buying him the jacket I have already told you about, but he exchanged it for a tin flute. Every time I went home I would find him in front of the door, discoursing sweet music on his instrument.

"When are you going to get around to washing my linen?" I asked him.

He replied with a new tune he had just composed. At Ségou he asked me for a hundred francs against his wages. I gave them to him. Ten minutes later he came back, his head dripping, and giving off a scent you could smell twenty meters off. In his hand was an empty flask, that had contained good perfume. He had gone into a shop; pointing to the flask he had said:

"How much?"

“A hundred francs!”

The hundred francs having changed hands, he had spilled the object of his affections, all at once, in the shop, over his pate!

At Niafounké he played me the same sort of trick. And still he hadn’t washed my clothes — because he had no soap, he said. Every morning I gave him five francs to buy this famous soap, and that was the last I saw of either Birama or the soap that day. When I scolded him he played me his music, and we ended in harmony. So, finally, I gave him a fine piece of soap and told him: “This time we’ll have no nonsense — see?”

The next day — no laundry!

“Where’s the soap?” I asked him.

He showed me an old battered and discolored helmet he was wearing proudly on his still odorous curls. He had traded the soap for this rubbish. Do you know why? You have to dig deep to come to understanding of why people do things. This is how Birama had worked it out. “In any case,” he had said to himself, “this soap will be lost to my master. It’ll melt in the water. Now, for a fortnight, I’ve been



crazy to own a helmet. I give up the soap, and I have the helmet. The boss isn't a loser, and I'm just that much better off."

"But how about the laundry?" you may be thinking. Did he wear linen, I ask you?

In the beginning he used to break my heart.

"I've had nothing to eat!" he would complain, piteously.

He looked well fed. He had had food, and he had a full stomach. But how can one know? So I gave him a piece of bread and five francs.

I left him, once, for a whole week. I had no need for his distinguished services on a trip to the Lobi country. When I came back I saw a negro at my door, his eyes hidden behind black sunglasses, helmeted and shod, dressed in a superb *boubou*, a cane in his hand, and a new flute in his belt.

"Good day!" he said to me. I recognized his voice. It was Birama. He looked like a chimpanzee in a vaudeville act. I began to laugh, when he said:

"I've had nothing to eat!"

"What? You've had nothing to eat for a week?"

"Yes!"

He was fat and well. He was even rosy!

“How about the sixty francs I left you when I went away?”

He showed me his purchases and made up his accounts. Cane: nine francs; flute, seventeen francs; shoes (they were pumps), eleven francs; *boubou*, twenty francs.

“And the other three francs?”

He held out his hand; a magnificent copper ring answered for him!

But he had had food; that was plain. Still, that evening, he repeated: “I’ve had nothing to eat!” Finally, I gave him twenty francs. He disappeared. An hour later he came back; he had added an umbrella to his outfit, under which, majestically, he trod!

You couldn’t have found a more perfect negro than Birama. There was one who didn’t renounce his country or his ancestors!

“Come, Birama!” I told him, one day, in Diré. “We’re going to buy some tinned stuff.”



We bought them; there were two boxes full. I took one and told him to take the other. I went on ahead. Near the house, I looked back. Birama was a hundred meters behind me, his umbrella in his hand. But what had he done with my box? It was another negro, a naked one, who was carrying that. Birama kept shouting to him: "Get on, there — get on!" He had commandeered the other, thanks to his helmet and his glasses. The naked one had obeyed, as they all do, always.

"All right," I said, when they both came up.
"But who is to pay him?"

"Pay him? No one will pay him! What an idea!"

He knew what he was doing. He'd been beaten often enough, I suppose. He taught me how to live in Africa.

It was at Oumé, on the Ivory Coast, that he taught me another lesson. On that day, as it happened, the French authorities were about to put to death three medicine men who had impaled a woman of the village of Zangue, on the pretext that she was possessed of a devil and was harming her family.

That is one of the ritual crimes that we try,

without much success, to suppress. The sorcerers are still powerful. We know very well that at Kalavi three young virgins are brought up, every year, to the age of sixteen, and then sacrificed to the god of the lagoon, the crocodile, to insure a good year's fishing. We know that the chief of the Niaboua tribe was able to eat up thirteen young girls without attracting our attention, and only came to grief with the fourteenth. He told the commandant there was nothing more delicious than a young girl's flesh, and generously told his recipé: have them boiled, not toasted.

We also know that not long ago a commandant found two blacks in a village square, where they were waiting to be cooked and eaten. He freed them, but as soon as the white man had gone off again the two blacks went back to their cage of their own free will, that the gods might not be disobeyed.

Nor are we ignorant of the fact that when, among the Lobi, a Peuhl or two are caught, a good dinner is always in prospect. But it's hard for us to prevent these sacrifices. We can only punish them



after they occur. That was what was to be done at Oumé.

“Look,” I said to Birama, showing him the three sorcerers. “Here are your medicine men. They killed a poor woman. Now the white men are going to kill them.”

Birama didn’t answer. He was thinking. The soldiers presented arms. First volley. One man fell.

Birama asked me if the slain woman had been old. I said, yes, she was old.

Second volley. Another fell.

“Well, if she was old, she would have died soon, anyway,” said Birama. “So the medicine men weren’t so very wicked.”

Third volley. The last one fell.

This very morning Birama came into my room.

“Have you eaten, Birama?”

“No! Nothing to eat!”

Question and reply had become a matter of routine. I used to see Birama, his head buried in his gourd, stuffing himself with rice and meal. Five minutes later I’d ask him: “Have you eaten?” “No—I’ve not eaten!”

A negro's stomach is certainly bottomless.

He brought me a catalogue — not for me, but for himself.

“What do you want me to do with that?”

Africa is plastered with the catalogues of our large shops. And not only on the coast, but in the interior, too. They come in sacks, addressed to the interpreters, the chiefs, the chiefs of police, the students in the schools. Yet they say French business isn't clever! These booklets are an enormous success. The negro who doesn't receive his catalogue for two months feels slighted, and writes a letter of complaint to the shops! These good looking books will be studied for days at a time by the negroes, who know of nothing more beguiling.

They are dazzled, and they order anything and everything. Some read the word serviette, and, looking no farther, send for fifty francs' worth of those goods. When they receive rolls of fine paper they think they've been robbed. Others call for baby clothes, because they're the cheapest, and wonder, when they come, why they can't get them on. Three



trucks full of parcel post arrive at Ouagadougou every week.

My boy wanted a feather duster! He pointed it out to me with his finger.

“Are you crazy? Get to hell out of here!”

In the afternoon he brought back his catalogue, his finger still on his feather duster.

“Write for me,” he said, “to Mademoiselle Samaritaine!”

“Will you tell me what on earth you expect to do with a feather duster?”

“Make music!”

That time I really thought he was making fun of me. Not at all, though. He showed me, in pantomime, what he expected to do with the thing; he had taken the duster for a clarinet with a tail!

Ah, Birama, my old boy, you never wash my clothes, you’re always hungry, you wear my pajamas, but, five thousand kilometers from home you still never know where you’re going, and you order a feather duster to play a clarinet!

XXIV

THE KING OF THE NIGHT

IT was in Dahomey, at Porto-Novo.

Before our time, two kingdoms divided Dahomey between them. One king was on the tableland of Abomey, the other on the lagoon, at Porto-Novo. It was the Lagoon king who called on us for help against Behanzin, his “cousin” of the highlands.

Since then there has been a new crop of cocoanuts in the palm trees. Behanzin is buried, and the successor of the Lagoon king now only calls himself a suzerain chief. One king, though, did resist the



inroads of the European sea: the Zounan, otherwise formerly known as the King of the Night.

What are his functions? His very title shows that they must be rather obscure. In the time of the kingdom of Porto-Novo, the Zounan was charged with seeing to it that the sun rose and set in due order. Ruling in broad daylight, France seems not to have dispossessed the representative of night. Whoever and whatever he may be, he still reigns. We ought to make his acquaintance.

“When do you want to see him?” M. Fourn asked me — he who was not only Governor of Dahomey, but something of a Dahomean himself, having ruled in that country for thirty years.

“This afternoon at three o’clock.”

“Oh, is that so? The King of the Night doesn’t show himself in the afternoon. The best you can hope for is that he’ll turn up between the time of the dog and that of the wolf.”

Twenty-five minutes past six was the hour finally chosen.

That same evening we waited for His Majesty in the gardens of Government House.



Soon after six we heard voices ; a procession was coming up the grand avenue of the capital. Governor Fourn pulled his mustaches and glanced at me out of the corners of his eyes. The procession came nearer. A fiacre was approaching. Seven naked Negroes, large and small, were harnessed to the shafts, serving as horses. On the box, in place of a driver, were two little black women, their breasts firm and naked, bearing under their nipples, the one a silver vase, the other an incense burner. Where the whip would have stood, was a French flag. On the left was a lighted lantern, its glass windows painted blue. Several umbrellas made a second roof for the rig. All around, and pushing from behind, was a great, noisy crew.

The crazy carriage grated on the gravel in the garden and came to a stop. The shades of the two doors were drawn. You'd have thought it was a fiacre for an adulterous assignation. We waited. Inside nothing moved.

“It isn’t dark enough yet,” said the Governor.

One of the attendants slipped under the carriage and knocked on the floor. I thought he was



letting His Majesty know that he had arrived at his destination. Silence.

“He must be combing his hair — he’s very vain.”

Then a loud cough made the coach shake. People spilled down from it. The umbrellas collapsed. A young girl who carried the royal sword across her belly took her place. The door opened. Zounan Medje, called the Zounan, King of the Night, appeared. The girl with the sword and the one with the incense burner were on either side of him; one was his daughter, the other his favorite wife. Thus flanked, the old man advanced slowly, between two seductive pairs of breasts.

He wore a plumed, double-pointed headdress, a heavy robe of green velvet embroidered with silver, a yellow toga over his shoulder, and, head bent, looking always at his silvered sandals, he blew his nose loudly in his short white beard, which was divided into two points.

“Good evening, Zounan!” said the Governor.

It was a point of etiquette never to say good day to him!



We went into a private drawing room. The first meeting was to be, so to speak, visual. It was the call of state.

“How goes the country?” the Governor asked him.

“Very well, very well, indeed.”

“And your health, Zounan?”

“Every evening I hope it will be as good as yours.”

Several other compliments of the same sort were exchanged. Then a boy passed glasses of champagne. The king produced a big handkerchief, veiled his face, and, behind that screen, drank. When he quenched his thirst or ate no one was allowed to see the royal countenance. But his throat was less discreet, for if one couldn’t see him drink, one could certainly hear.

He told us he would be highly honored to see us in his home.

“Good! That’s arranged, then, Zounan!” said the Governor. “We’ll go to see you at ten o’clock to-morrow morning.”

A proud delight lighted his face. He was led



back to his carriage, and, swaying and groaning, the old bit of rolling stock moved off, lighted by torches.

I WENT down into Porto-Novo. No town in Africa is to be compared to it. It is neither a group of huts nor a European city. Of all blacks the Dahomeans are the most civilized. They were the first, already many centuries ago, to come into contact with the whites. Their coast, known as the Slave Coast, shows by its very name that it was there that the slave traders first installed their market. The journeys of their ancestors to the Americas enlightened the sons. From a primitive life, little by little, they created a social system. They showed an aptitude for trade. Trade creating obligations, they built towns. Porto-Novo was planned and built by them. The Dahomeans are the only natives of French Africa who have really established settled homes.

The night market was in full swing. The love of barter is carried so far in Porto-Novo that buying and selling does not stop at sundown. The dealers keep their shops open, right out in the open air,



until eleven o'clock at night. You see hundreds of old women, with oil lamps or candles burning on piles of earth. From a distance you would think you were seeing a field full of giant fireflies. It's a pretty sight. I was looking at it when a crowd of people appeared. By the torches and the umbrellas I recognized the *cortège* of the King of the Night. His Majesty was getting home.

I found a place to look on. The Zounan emerged from his fiacre. We were twenty paces apart, but the sovereign had seen me. Instead of going in he turned to face me. And, in the great empty space the popular deference had left to him, having bowed low to me, he picked up the skirts of his robe and began to dance. Three little steps forward with his right foot, then with his left. Then he stretched out his arm and his toga flapped at his side like a great wing. Once more he bowed, and then this old man began to spin. The plume of his headdress waved in the air; his beard, certainly, must have been shaking. I stayed still. He danced for more than three minutes. Then he took off his hat, and, with a sweeping gesture, under the eyes of the crowd, and in the torchlight,



he saluted me, as with a sword. Then, leaving me rooted to the spot, he disappeared into his house.

“That was a great honor he did you,” M. Fourn told me, later. “‘Look,’ he was telling you, in his own fashion, ‘the king dances for you, noble traveler; he is only your actor.’”

NEXT morning we were on time to the minute. The Zounan was expecting us, not outside, but in his yard. It is permissible for him to see daylight within his own walls. He had put on a checked robe. Medals shone on his breast. His head was covered with a real jockey’s cap. Ensemble — red hat, orange cassock.

Women, servants, people of every sort, dogs, swarmed about us.

He led the way for us, striking the ground with his cane as if it had been a halberd. We climbed a wooden staircase. The room we entered was heavy with velvet and satin. On a round table the food we were to eat and the bottles dedicated to our thirst were already spread out. There was champagne, an



alcohol of peppermint and kikrini, an English medicine for use in fever, colic, gooseflesh and barber's itch!

The king lolled at his ease. Governor, commandant, chief of police, all white authority seated in his armchair! A statue of Notre Dame de Lourdes, under a glass dome, had the place of honor in the room. When he saw me looking at it, the king said:

“Mary! That’s Mary!”

“Is your Majesty a Catholic?” I asked.

“I was one before I became king. Since then, my people being Fetichians, I have had to pay them the courtesy of believing in their fetiches. Just the same I love Mary well. Ah, Mary!”

The king gave the chief of police a stern look. There was a reason for that! His newest wife had, lately, fled from the palace. Considerably upset, Zounan had confided his troubles to our detective, who had not shown much zeal in trying to recover the girl. I believe that he even advised His Majesty to let the fifteen-year-old child follow the dictates of her heart.



“Oh, come — are you still angry with me?” said the white man.

The king replied, very simply:

“A young girl is an old man’s alcohol.”

“Zounan!” said the Governor. “You know what great friends we are. We can talk frankly to one another. Well, your people aren’t very encouraging. No matter how much we do for them we don’t get so much as a word of thanks.”

“That’s true — you get no thanks in words, but when you do something good, they pray for you to the fetiches in their houses.”

Whereupon, under the pretext of drinking, he hid his mocking eyes behind his handkerchief. Then, unveiling himself, he went on:

“I’ll tell you how it is. The people here are like women who have two pockets, one in front, one behind. In the front pocket, which has a hole in it, they put their gratitude for the good that has been done to them; in the one behind, which is made of rhinoceros skin, they put their memories of ill treatment, and of bitterness, which are never lost.”

A tune began to sound, from a phonograph. One



of Zounan's wives, having stepped four paces into the room, had started the machine. He banished his wife with a wave of his handkerchief, as well as all the crowd of hangers on, who, filling up doors and windows, kept us from having any air.

"Listen, Governor," Zuonan went on, "it's only when a woman gets a new husband that she finds out that the first was any good. That is how it is with my people and you. Even the king's wives aren't satisfied with him. Listen, my Governor, my good friend, a great chief should have neither friends nor brothers. A great chief should not look for gratitude from the mob, since he cannot have two mouths, one to speak white words to please him, the other to say black words, also to please himself. Listen, Governor, a great chief should not pay attention to the gossip of the market place."

Again he hid his face, and behind his silk handkerchief, we heard:

"Gratitude is of importance only to little people."

Rouqayrol, the painter, was making a study of him. Zounan glanced at him with a friendly and



complacent eye which said: "The picture goes well?"

We had to sample the pastry. The king himself cut the slices. The plate on which he gave me mine was decorated with a picture of Edward VII.

"My excellent contemporary!" he said, not without admitting, with a smile, the audacity of such an association.

Once more he expelled women, children and servants from the room.

"Being King of the Night, I'm forbidden to get up. So I can no longer travel. I only know Porto-Novo. Tell me, most honorable traveler, a little of what goes on in the world."

"Your excellent Majesty," I said, "it's much as it is in Porto-Novo, whether it be small or great."

"So I suspected," he said.

He offered us kikrini, asti, peppermint alcohol, and a purgative draft.

"If I had only known," he added, "I would have had a young turkey cooked for you."

By which he meant that the pleasure he had taken in our visit exceeded all his expectations. We took our leave. Going with us, he said: "Where there



THE KING OF THE NIGHT



is money there is peace." As he said good-by to the Governor he said: "In my country, when one is a great chief, one is not congratulated for that!"

Then he raised his jockey cap.

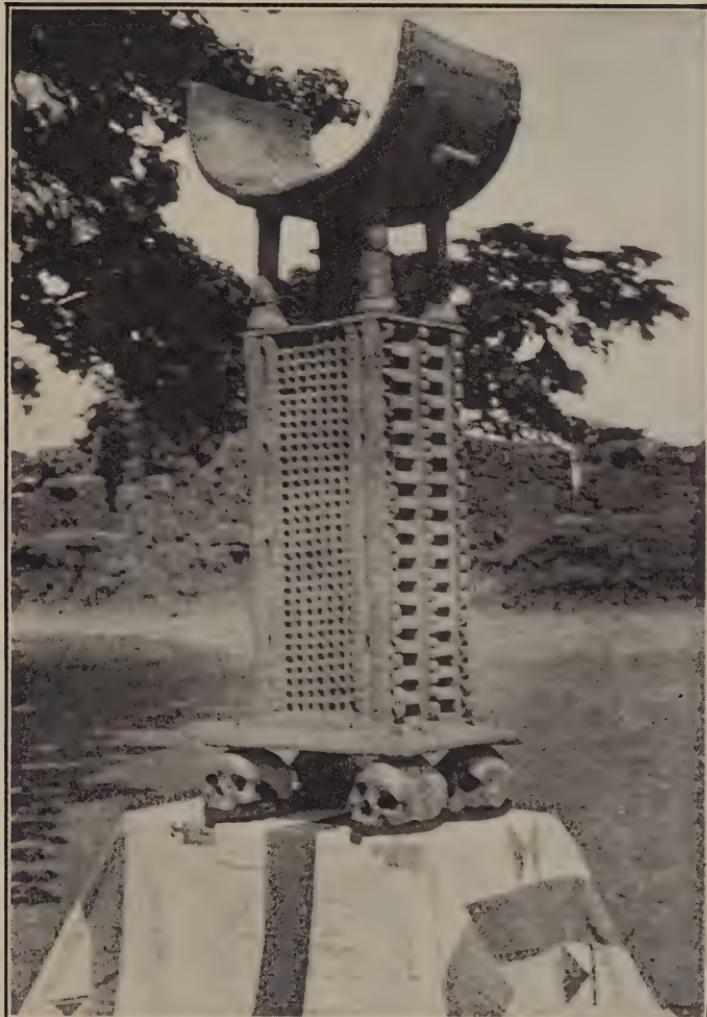
His bald head was not the one to show thus.

Even by day, the king wore a nightcap.

ABOMEY was in mourning. Twenty years after his death Behanzin, newly encased in a European coffin, returned to his capital. France, having tested his ashes, had decided that they had cooled enough not to set the country ablaze. It's hot enough in Dahomey without that!

It was a grand funeral, that is to say a superb festival.

Ouanilo, the beloved son of the dead man, had brought back his father's body, in the name of our



THE THRONE OF BEHANZIN

government, from Algiers to Marseilles, from Marseilles to Cotonou, and from the Slave Coast to Abomey. Having gone with him, at the time of his exile, when he was a small black prince, Ouanilo, educated by France, first in Martinique, later in Algiers, was now a lawyer at Bordeaux.

He was seeing his native land for the first time since his banishment. He returned to it with his black father and his white wife.

Graceful, dressed in European clothes, well educated, full of tact and reserve, he was really a bashful gentleman. His good manners made him feel out of place at once in his own land. Among his brothers, with their naked torsos, he didn't know what to do with his high collars, his coats, his shoes, and, above all, his education. He looked at his relatives with an eye that begged them to forgive him.

The funeral rites were to last a long time. Governor Fourn had lodged the prince and the princess in a white house, not far from the ruins of the palace in which, under the shade of the ancestral throne, set upon four skulls, the royal child had been born. The shutters of this house remained closed.



Behanzin, according to old custom, was not yet considered dead. To be sure the coffin in which his remains reposed was in the home of his oldest son, the great noble Aouagb , Prefect of Boicon and of Abomey, but, for the people at large, Behanzin was only a very sick man. The people wept and asked anxiously about the king's health.

"We must go home," they were saying. "Our king is sick."

They spoke in low tones, and went away in silence. My boy ran to me, and said: "You know, the king is worse since morning."

Two of his wives, so old that when they walked their heads hung as low as their knees, watched in the dim light, near the coffin, attending him on his return from his long journey. Finally, the next day, Behanzin died, officially.

THE Dahomean rites began. The tom-toms sounded.

On the first day the oldest son, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters and sincere friends mourned in the house.



On the second day the ghost so departed.

On the third day Behanzin's best friend, he who had said to him: "Do not fight the French," killed three goats.

On the fourth day the sons sacrificed the domestic animals.

Ouanilo, always dressed in his European clothes, did his duty. I saw him returning from the house of death to his home, his hands and his shirt bloody. He walked quickly, as if ashamed. Behind the shutters his white wife awaited him, anxiously.

The funeral rites went on. While Ouanilo's brothers, rich and powerful chiefs, were preparing to offer rich gifts to the names of their father, Ouanilo counted his pennies. On the day of the presentation of breech-clouts his shame would be proclaimed to the assembled people. The funeral herald would cry the names of his brothers for hours, proclaiming their generosity, their filial piety. Ouanilo had neither herds nor a share of the family treasure. His people made no more gifts to him. His people? It looked at the former little prince with no desire to remember or acknowledge him. Ouanilo was no longer at home.



He went to Boicon, among the white merchants. White merchants do not give much merchandise for little sums of money. Ouanilo came back with a few pieces of calico. He had a ring, and he would add that to his poor breech-clouts, to prove his good will.

The great day came.

It was in the courtyard of the great house of Aouagb  , his older brother. The white authorities, from the Governor to the Bishop, were there. Aouagb  's seventy wives, assembled, chanted the funeral dirge. Ouanilo, hesitating, moved away from their savage cries, and led his white wife, much troubled by the transports of her sisters-in-law, to a place between the Bishop and the Governor. Each of his brothers stayed, according to custom, among his wives and his servants. Ouanilo looked for a place to stand.

A surprised movement stirred the crowd. Superb in a red vestment, one great breast bare, wearing a Phrygian bonnet, shod in sandals, a cudgel-scepter on one shoulder, a man with a god-like bearing appeared, under an umbrella, between two tremendous



Amazons, and followed by a royal entourage. This was Agboli-Agbo, Ouanilo's uncle, Behanzin's brother, the last King of Dahomey, dethroned, exiled, and pardoned.

For the second time Agboli-Agbo tried a bold stroke. He showed himself to the people in royal guise. Would the commandant, as on a former Fourteenth of July, leap upon him, seize him with one hand by the breast, nails in his flesh, and with the other tear away his bonnet, his sandals, his scepter and his spittoon?

The old lion seemed to expect some such scene. It didn't come. He took his place amid his court and his Amazons. Ouanilo looked at him in stupefaction.

The herald began. Brothers and sons were honored in long apostrophes. Breech-clouts, fans, bottles of liquor, objects of gold and silver, oxen, hides, all were offered, to be buried in the great grave into which Behanzin was to descend. When the name of Ouanilo was heard, accompanied by so few gifts, it made so little stir that no one sought out the cherished son. Ouanilo bowed his head.



IN the house with the closed shutters Ouanilo and his white wife did not taste the viands sent to him by his father's former subjects. *Couscous*, rice, even the eggs, were thrown out when night came. He was greatly embarrassed when I asked him for a glass of water from a full gourd, and made me understand that he did not want to give me any of it, and would drink none himself.

KINGDOM of the fetich makers, that is to say of poison, Dahomey is in the hands of the sorcerers. It is at the same time the most advanced and the most mysterious of the black countries. Monseigneur Steinmetz, our bishop, knows that only too well. He had to intervene only last week, with the devil priests, for, unless he had done so, one of his missionaries, touched the other day by three veiled fetich makers, as he returned on his bicycle along the road from Kalavi, would be dead by now.

His arm was growing stiff, then it withered; the disease rose to his shoulder, spread to his chest.

Monseigneur sent for the chief fetich maker, who

said to him: "Oh, great white man! The respect you inspire in me compels me to tell you that some of my ghosts did that."

"Oh, great fetich maker," replied the prelate, "for my sake, you will cure my servant."

The antidote was supplied. To-day the missionary shook my hand, and his hand was healed.

Fetich makers, men and women, swarmed at Behanzin's funeral; they wore ballet costumes astonishing to see. Ouanilo went far out of his way to avoid them.

At night the French commandant's faithful boy entered the Bordeaux lawyer's house: he carried boxes of tinned goods on which the evil eye of the priests of Maon could not have fallen.

Ouanilo went by himself to find his birthplace. I saw him walking on the plateau of Abomey, stopping, questioning himself. One day a chief, borne in his hammock, passed near him; his servants carried parasol, spittoon and other articles of his use. When Ouanilo's brothers, greater chiefs by far than this passer-by, had the road cleared against their coming, Ouanilo stood on one side, and, with eyes that were



as full of wonder as a white man's, followed, for a long distance, this traditional procession.

One day he seated himself amid the ruins of his father's palace. His hands were clasped on his knee. His eyes wandered over the mud walls, ravaged by time. He rose, and wandered about. He bowed before the tomb of Gle-Gle, his grandfather — whereas he should have fallen down and beaten his forehead on the ground. His ancestors no longer called to him.

The sixty and seventy wives of his brothers made him deeply thoughtful. I saw him, discreetly, throw away his cigarette, as they smoked pipes. In his drawing room, one evening, while we were chatting, his brother Robert entered, nude to the waist. Ouanilo made him sit in an armchair, opposite the white princess, his wife, who wore a dinner dress. He looked like a man lost in a maze. At night the poor fellow always had a headache. He couldn't endure the sound of the tom-toms any more. He was a poor devil who had lost his nationality. He himself confessed: "Won't these funeral rites ever be over?"

Two months passed by. I found myself in the roadstead at Cotonou, on the liner *America*. The



sea was rough. We wondered if passengers could be taken aboard. Barges tried to approach the gangway; the waves made it difficult. In these barges, curious carriages, only the bodies of which remained, the shafts having disappeared, contained the travelers. Without these carriages one can neither land nor embark on this coast. A crane lifts them and lowers them. So they are hung for a moment over the sea. You would think you were setting out in an airplane to fly the South Atlantic!

“For Heaven’s sake,” I said, “it’s Ouanilo and the princess who are hanging at the end of the crane! So they didn’t poison them!”

Prince Ouanilo was on his way home — to France.

The carriage having capsized as it reached the deck, it was on their knees that the Behanzins came on board. Robert and another brother accompanied the travelers.

The heavy sea had upset them. They went to the bar for a cordial.

“Outside!” said the barkeeper. “No negroes here!”



“But I’m a first class passenger,” said Ouanilo.

“All right, I can serve you, then, but not the two baboons!”

Ouanilo sought me out. He said his brothers were sick, which was obvious; that the barkeeper refused them a glass of cognac; that, after all, they had fought in France, and that Robert had been wounded.

Disdained as a white man in Dahomey, as a negro in France—poor Ouanilo! I had cognac brought to his cabin.

THE *America* sailed on for several days. Ouanilo ate alone with his wife, at a small table for two, keeping quiet, smiling, hoping that in time the whites would forgive him for being black. He told me how glad he was to be going back to Bordeaux. The last month in Abomey had seemed so long to him! He had felt out of place — and they had disliked him!

One night Ouanilo did not appear in the saloon. Yet the sea was calm. A steward came for the doctor, who left his place. Dinner was finished for the rest of us. An hour later the captain told me that Ouanilo



was in *extremis*. The doctor confirmed this. I found Ouanilo in bed in his berth. But he was no longer Ouanilo. In three hours he had changed beyond recognition. He was dying.

“The sorcerers — the sorcerers!” he said.

He lasted until ten o’clock next morning. There was time enough to put him ashore at Dakar. He died quickly there. He had brought his father back to African soil. His fate was to die there, too.

XXVI
GABON REVISITED

THE ship that was bearing me toward the Equator was called the *Europe*, a very small old tub that had carried at least three generations of Colonials on coastwise journeys. I was on deck because one couldn't spend all one's time in the bar, especially when one suffers far more from heartburn than from grief!

A man with an angular face came up, touched his helmet, and said: "I am a friend of Philippe Lallemand's; he told me I'd meet you on this trip. How are you?"



He told me he had come straight from Monte Carlo.

"I had fourteen thousand francs," he said, "with which I planned to spend four months in Paris. But — oh, the devil with it! I'll square myself with the government and turn elephant hunter. My name is Rass. See you later."

He looked to me as if he were about as well fitted to hunt elephants as I am to play a flageolet. So, meeting him again a moment later: "Have you got good rifles?" I asked him. "For what purpose?" said he. I let the elephants lie.

This fellow Rass was always scribbling with a pencil. From time to time he pulled out an old envelope from his pocket and wrote on it for two or three minutes. Impressions of his trip? No! Once he showed me what he was doing. I read:

*One day when I set out gayly
From the canteen,
When I was in the army,
I saw the morning star!*



He turned out a dozen like that every afternoon, turning all his ideas into quatrains, even without any help from Mac Orlan. A phonograph was playing Reynaldo Hahn's "If My Verses Had Wings." That inspired Rass:

*If cows had wings
One would see them on high
Following their tails
Like lovely nightingales.*

An hour later he came to show me a line he had added:

But cows only have teats!

As we neared Gabon his poetry changed. He advised all young Colonials not to stop at Gabon, and the quatrain ended:

Be, rather, always the vagabond!

The next day the *Europe* dropped anchor off Libreville. We were at Gabon. Rass wrote no more. He looked toward the shore.



“There’s the church!” he said. “A little higher up is our house — and, behind it, the cemetery!”

He had lived there, with a Gabonaise. For African colonists the Gabonaise women are what the Japanese used to be for those stationed in the Far East; the little girl friends of all. You can send for one, and she’ll come to you in the Congo, in Dahomey, farther still from home. . . .

“I was at Oubangui Chari,” said Rass. “I’d sent money to a friend and told him: send me a girl. Two months later, one evening, at the club, when I’d forgotten all about it, we saw a girl from another land, who’d just arrived, dressed like a monkey and perched on Louis Quinze heels. She looked us over, and said: ‘I’ve come to find Missie ’Ass.’”

“Rass — here’s your Gabonaise!” they shouted.

“Well — let’s have a look at you!” I said.

She came nearer, greeted me, and said: “Here’s your wife!”

“That’s how it began. It lasted eight years. Then they poisoned her for me.”

“Who?”

“Oh, the old hags — because the little thing



wouldn't leave her white man. It was a slow business. I watched her dying for two months. She used to say: 'I'm going to die, but I'll leave your linen in good order.' Ah — one doesn't forget a Gabonaise! I've never been back to Libreville since."

"Come ashore with me, Rass, and show me around."

"Eh — well, why not? All right — I'll go ashore this time."

THE colonial towns along the coast look like toy sheepfolds, without any sheep. A few houses put down anywhere, a few trees, a few figures. Rass took me first to the church. It was empty. Our saints, male and female, exhausted, I suppose, by the climate, had faded — even the blue belt of Notre Dame de Lourdes was almost white. Rass ignored the chairs in the first two rows, and sought one of the benches at the back, looking around. Finally he stopped and said:

"This was her place!"

He stood, helmet in hand, his eyes closed. Was he praying? Were his thoughts profane? From



the roulette tables of Monte Carlo to this church on the Equator! He came back to earth, and said:

“No medicine could save her. I know — I tried everything.”

We left the church. Rass led me toward their house. A Gabonaise, followed by a negro who looked as if it were his idea to place her among those who had just landed, was walking along on her high heels, her black legs in yellow silk stockings. Her body, which, if not for sale, was, at least, to let, was clad in a pretty pink dress; she was by no means to be despised, that girl!

“Have nothing to do with her!” said Rass. “I like you too well. When you start that there’s no turning back!”

Then, as if he were speaking to himself:

“Every day she climbed this hill from the market to our house, and when the porter had laid out her purchases on the table she would say to me: ‘The best in the market for the best man in the world!’ And the days when the mail from France came! ‘Here are flowers from your own country,’ she would mur-



mur. 'I'll go out, so that you can enjoy them better alone.' "

Rass didn't feel the stifling heat. He hurried his steps, walking straight toward his past.

"Oh," he said, "it began eight years ago, and it's not over yet!" He had stopped before a wall. "Look! It was here. She was always at this window, and when she saw me coming, she'd call: 'Vao!' It didn't mean anything, it was just a word of her own."

An old negress, attracted by the sound of our voices, put her gray head out of one of the windows. Rass, when he saw her, stood still, rooted.

"Ah — and *they're* living in the house! That's too much!"

"Good day, Missie Rass. Welcome!"

"So — it was so that you could get the house, was it, you old witch?"

"You are welcome!"

"You miserable old hag!"

"You can come in, if you like."

"You foul old crow!"

Becoming a negro again himself, Rass spat, the better to express his scorn.

“So you went back to Europe?”

Rass pulled me away. He was trembling.

“You see, I wasn’t rich. Her aunts — that old crone in the window is one of them — wanted to make a better match for the child. As it was they fell heirs to the house and what was in it. Oh, they got everything!”

“Hey — are you going to the graveyard?”

The old woman pursued us with that cry.

“Going to the graveyard? The graveyard? The graveyard?”

“God!” said Rass. “The negro — you must either cherish them or strangle them!”

The walk was a wearisome one. There’s no pleasure in stretching your legs in that country, let me tell you. I’d have been glad to stop and sit down, on the way, and drink, drink. . . . But we went on to the cemetery.

“I shouldn’t have come ashore,” said Rass. “She’s calling to me now, again I have to do as she bids me. Ask any one who’s lived with a Gabonaise —



any one! I wish to God I'd taken her to France!"

We came to the graveyard. Rass looked for her tomb. He had had it bricked up, but the little beasts had seen to the bricks long ago. . . . But he found the place where she lay. I sat down on a nearby stone.

"She wasn't born on the coast, but in the forest," he said, thinking aloud. Just what difference that had made, though, he kept to himself. He saw that I looked tired. "We've come a long way," he said, "to visit her in the cemetery — but she came much farther to find me at Oubangui Chari."

A moment passed.

"Oh," he said, "she still fills my thoughts!"

Something was marked on the bricks. I bent to look.

"To My Gabonaise," said Rass, simply. "I might have added: 'Spirit without sadness, heart without guile.'"

The *Europe's* foghorn blew for the first time — warning of departure. We were not passengers for Gabon, but for the Congo. I stood up. We started back. At the foot of the hill, at the beginning of the



road that led to the wharf, a negro, seeing us, waved his arms and ran toward us.

“Ah, Zean!” he said, stopping before Rass.

“Why, Pierre, old fellow!” said Rass, embracing him.

The negro explained that he had known Rass was on the *Europe*, and had been looking for him for three hours. I left them alone. But the boat was ready to take us back to the ship.

“Come, Rass,” I called. “It’s time to go.”

White man and black joined me.

“Take me with you,” the negro said to Rass.

The friends were parting. The boat took us aboard.

“Yes, yes, as soon as I’m settled,” Rass answered the other, who stayed on the quay. “*Au revoir*, Pierre, old fellow.”

“Send for me, Zean! Zean!”

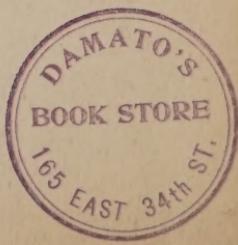
When Rass had stopped waving to him he said:
“He’s her brother!”

THE END

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XX

